

2 Dead Fish Named Kevin

by L.A. Witt

*no fish were
harmed in the
making of
this book.*



2 DEAD FISH NAMED
KEVIN

L.A. WITT

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ABOUT 2 DEAD FISH NAMED KEVIN

“Help raise money to improve our habitat! For a small donation, we’ll name a fish after your ex and feed it to the bears on Valentine’s Day!”

For Garrett Mitchell, who just found out his butthead of an ex-boyfriend cheated on him, that donation is money well spent.

And Tristan Waverly was just unceremoniously dumped by a man who is absolutely worthy of being tossed to hungry bears, so he’s more than happy to buy a fish.

As the bears chow down, though, everyone’s wondering the same thing—is it a coincidence, or are both fish named after the same guy?

There’s only one way to find out.

But when Garrett and Tristan come face to face, suddenly the last man either wants to think about is Kevin.

2 Dead Fish Named Kevin is a light, fluffy, and short Valentine’s Day romance.

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2 Dead Fish Named Kevin

First edition

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Cover Art by Lori Witt

Editor: Rebecca Cartee

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ISBN: 978-1-64230-135-9

Print ISBN: 979-8-36581-707-4

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CHAPTER 1

“HOW IS everyone this beautiful Valentine’s Day?” the zookeeper chirped into her headset.

The surprisingly large crowd gathered around the black bear exhibit responded with cheers and applause—not terribly loud, given that this was a zoo, but enough to convey that people were quite happy to be here.

It was a crisp but comfortable day, especially for mid-February. All I’d had to wear was a leather jacket over my T-shirt. And since such a nice day had fallen on a Saturday, that probably explained why there was a decent crowd.

A couple dozen kids who must’ve been six or seven were gathered by the zookeeper at the fence in front of the viewing area while the adults—probably fifty of us, if I had to guess—stood behind them. Beyond the fence was a deep moat, and on the other side, an elaborate habitat in which three black bears kept a close eye on a door off to my right and about eight feet off the ground. I suspected that was where the food was going to come from.

The zookeeper launched into a speech about how bears would normally be hibernating this time of year, but since they have food available year-round, the ones in zoos often don’t. Then there was something about how their diets were closely

monitored to keep them from getting too fat; that was apparently an issue with non-hibernating captive bears. There was also a bit about how these three couldn't be released back into the wild for various reasons, so there was less concern about them getting used to being fed by humans. Something. I don't know. I wasn't listening too closely. Mostly, I was watching the bears and sort of chuckling to myself about why I was even here.

I mean, I loved animals. Fucking adored them. Coming to the zoo on a Saturday morning wasn't exactly out of the ordinary for me. But I usually avoided special events, because while I loved animals, I wasn't fond of crowds.

Today was an exception.

As the zookeeper kept talking at length, I empathized with the bears, who were clearly getting impatient. They had to know there was food coming. I was itching for them to get fed too.

God, I can't wait to watch them tear that one fish to pieces.

I had to bite back a laugh. It was so petty and vindictive and ridiculous, but as soon as I'd seen the ad, I hadn't been able to resist because it just sounded so deliciously satisfying. And the money went to help maintain the bears' habitat, so it was for a good cause. That made it...a little less petty, right?

Hell, who cared?

Finally, the zookeeper was done talking, and she announced that it was time to get started.

In the habitat, the door the bears had been watching slid open. Another zookeeper poked his head out, and he grinned as the bears gathered below. I kind of envied him right then—how cool would that be, getting paid to toss food to bears?

And then he waved at them, and all three waved their giant paws back at him, and I nearly died of jealousy.

I am seriously in the wrong line of work.

“Okay, Jeremy,” the zookeeper near us called out. “Who are our first three fish?”

Jeremy hoisted a bucket onto the ledge, and he withdrew the first of three good size salmon. As he tossed a fish to each bear, he called out: “Here we have Charlie. Shannon. And... ‘no name, but you know what you did, you cheating jerk.’” That last one sent a ripple of laughter through the crowd.

Immediately, the bears tore into their fish, and a woman called out, “Ha! That’s what you get, Charlie!”

Everyone chuckled.

Then Jeremy put another bucket in the window, immediately grabbing the attention of the bears. One continued chewing, a tail sticking out of his mouth, but he focused intently on Jeremy as he waited for the next snack.

“Okay,” Jeremy said. “Now we have ‘that—’ oh, I can’t read all of that with kids here, and there’s no actual name, but I’m pretty sure their ex also bought them a cockroach to feed the meerkats, so...” He dropped the fish as everyone laughed, and while I had no idea what the person’s ex had done, it was definitely satisfying to watch the fish get ripped to shreds in their honor.

Jeremy then dangled two salmon and said, “I don’t know if this is a coincidence, a mistake, or if someone was mad enough to buy two fish in this guy’s honor, but here’s Kevin...” He tossed a fish. “And...Kevin.”

In the same moment I shouted out my glee at watching my ex get eaten in finned effigy, another male voice went up: “Suck it, Kevin!”

Probably not appropriate with kids around, but whatever. Everyone laughed, and I looked around to see if I could pick the guy out of the crowd. Apparently, he was doing the same thing, because we locked eyes and both shared a grin and a nod.

“Did you guys both date him?” the girl with the headset asked. “Or is it two different Kevins who deserved to be fed to the bears?”

“Don’t know,” I said. “But knowing my ex...” I shrugged. “Probably the same guy.”

“Twenty bucks says it’s the same guy!” the other man replied with a laugh.

“Ooh!” The zookeeper grinned. “Now I’m invested!” She gestured for us to move toward each other. “You boys compare notes, and we’ll check back with you in a minute!”

I glanced toward the bears munching happily on the fish named Kevin, then shrugged again. Oh, hell, why not?

People gave us room as we made our way to each other. As we came closer...

Whoa. I almost forgot about the fish, the bears, or that lying, cheating douchecanoe. This guy? Holy crap.

He was a couple of inches shorter than me—Five-eight? Five-nine?—and probably in his late twenties or so, same as me. *Maybe* early thirties with a great skin care routine. His sandy blond hair toed that line between slightly mussed and perfectly arranged, and those hazel eyes almost had me tripping over nothing.

Wow. I'd barely even noticed other men since goddamned Kevin dumped me last summer. Just recently, I'd started to feel the tingle of temptation to start dating again, only to find out *a month ago* that Kevin had been cheating on me through most of our two-year relationship, and I'd been pretty much done with humanity ever since.

But one look at this guy, and I swore all my dating profiles spontaneously reactivated on their own. Single, available, and with an enthusiastic libido, right here.

He stopped when we were close enough to hear each other over the crowd (which was currently egging on the bears as they feasted on some more fish), and that shy smile made my heart go wild. How was it legal to be that cute?

"Hi." He extended his hand. "So, you had a jackass Kevin too?"

Right. That was why we'd been crossing the crowd to introduce ourselves. Because of Kevin.

"Yeah." I laughed dryly as I accepted the handshake. "Don't tell me you named it"—I nodded toward the bears and the fish carcasses—"after Kevin Tollefson?"

In a flash, his smile vanished, and his jaw fell open. "No way."

I blinked. "Wait, are you serious?"

"Kevin Tollefson." He inclined his head, still grasping my hand. "About six-one, blond crewcut? New York Rangers tattoo?"

"Oh my God." I groaned as I released his hand. "He has a *crewcut* now? Really?"

The laugh that emerged from this beautiful stranger blurred my memories of whatshisname. At the same time, it sharpened my anger toward the asshole. It was one thing to hurt me. I didn't like it, but I could take it.

Who looked at someone like this and thought, *yeah, I'mma break his heart?*

Kevin, that was who. Fucking *Kevin*.

Unaware of my brain spinning out, the guy took out his phone. "Oh, you never saw the crewcut? Get a load of this."

He showed me the screen, and I snorted. "Wow. That's... um. A look."

"Right?" The guy rolled his eyes as he pocketed his phone. "Not sure what he was going for, and quite honestly, I don't care anymore."

"Amen to that." I put my fist up, and he got the most adorable smile as he bumped it.

The zookeeper's voice turned my head: "So do we have a verdict?" She was almost gleeful in her excitement. "Same Kevin? Or different Kevins?"

"Same Kevin," we said at the same time.

That brought raucous laughter out of all the adults in the crowd. The kids were mostly focused on the bears and didn't seem to really follow what the adults were laughing about. Probably just as well.

"Are you guys serious?" a woman near us asked. "You both dated the same person, and..." She gestured toward the fish.

"Yep," the other guy said. "He was a real piece of work."

“Ugh. To say the least,” I muttered.

Then he stiffened a bit and turned to me, brow furrowed. “Wait... When exactly did you date him?”

Oh. Huh. Yeah, that was a valid question, especially given everything I’d recently learned about Cheater McSluttypants.

I cleared my throat. “We broke up in June. What about you guys?”

The bitter laugh and the eyeroll didn’t leave much to the imagination. “We just broke up a couple of weeks ago, but we started dating in...March, I think?” Then he turned sheepish, and he actually looked a bit worried. “For the record, I had *no idea*.”

I waved my hand. “Nah, I figured. Turned out he was cheating on someone else when we got together, and he cheated on me the entire time. So...you’re good.”

He exhaled, obviously relieved. “Okay. Just, uh... Didn’t want you to think...”

“It’s all good. He’s just that good of a liar.”

My new friend grunted in agreement. “Understatement of the year.”

“Right?”

We both chuckled, and we continued watching the bears. The feeding wrapped up pretty quickly, and the crowd started to disperse. When the kids left, the rail was freed up, so I moved closer and rested my arms on it.

To my very pleasant surprise, I wasn’t the only one.

“I swear,” he said, leaning on the rail beside me, “bears are nature’s biggest form of false advertising.”

I shot him a puzzled look. “Huh?”

“Look at them.” He flailed his hand toward the bears. “They’re fluffy. They have cute faces. And *those ears*.” He made a disgusted sound and shook his head. “How can something with cute little round ears be a killing machine?”

I burst out laughing loud enough to attract the attention of one of the fuzzy murderers, who watched us as he chewed a bite of salmon. “Okay. Okay, you make a good point. But I mean, all the big cats are pretty adorable too.”

“Hmm. True. Which makes you wonder how we managed to become the dominant species on the planet when we turn to mush at the sight of apex predators.”

I cocked a brow. “You’re one of those people who’s going to die right after he says, ‘here, kitty, kitty,’ aren’t you?”

His horrible attempt at innocence was even more endearing than round ears and fluffy kitties, which said a lot. “I... Yeah. But as long as I get to pet the kitty before it murders me...” He shrugged.

I laughed, shaking my head, and I started to say something, but caught him staring at me. “What?”

“Hmm?” He jumped, clearing his throat, and shifted his attention back to the bears. “Nothing.”

It was just my imagination, though. Maybe? Yeah, I was probably reading too much into it. Story of my life.

But what I wasn’t reading into was the fact that I didn’t want us to go our separate ways once we left the bear exhibit.

Heart racing with sudden nerves, I said as casually as I could, “Listen, um... Now that *they’ve* eaten...” I motioned

toward the bears, and I cringed at the heat rising in my face as I timidly asked, “Do you want to maybe grab lunch?”

The way his face lit up was absolutely magic.

“Sure,” he said. “I didn’t catch your name though.”

“Garrett. Yours?”

“Tristan.”

We exchanged smiles. Then we left the bear to their fish—including what little remained of the two fish named Kevin—and went looking for the zoo’s food pavilion.

CHAPTER 2

TRISTAN

I COULDN'T BELIEVE my luck.

Any other time, I probably would've ignored the zoo's ad, but it just happened to have come across my newsfeed the day Kevin swung by to drop off a few things at my apartment. Of course, he'd wanted to chat and catch up and see how I was doing, and my God, the, "Hey, as long as I'm here..." followed by the eyebrow waggle and the nod toward my bedroom—I saw that coming from a mile away.

I'd told him he could eat a dick—and emphasized that I meant someone else's, not mine—before sending him on his merry way. Maybe my phone was listening or something, because when I'd started scrolling social media to cool off, there it was:

Feed your ex to a bear this Valentine's Day!

The headline had made me laugh out loud, and I'd briefly entertained calculating how much I'd be willing to pay to actually have someone yeet Kevin into a pen with some grizzlies. Then curiosity had gotten the best of me, and I'd read the details, learning that it was black bears, not grizzlies, and the ex would be fed to them in effigy by way of yummy salmon. And the money was for a good cause, so...why the hell not?

Now there was a bear munching happily on a salmon named after Kevin. And me?

Oh Lord, I was strolling toward the food pavilion with Garrett.

Somewhere in my head was a lone brain cell trying desperately to get super pissed at the confirmation that Kevin was the cheating dickweasel I'd suspected he was. The rest of me, though—holy crap.

Garrett was *stunning*. He was white like me, a little taller than I was, with short dark hair and one of those beards that he either kept painstakingly short or was the result of not bothering to shave for a few days. That look was *catnip* for me. Then there were those near-black eyes that seemed to be full of mischief.

In fact, I'd noticed him when I'd joined the crowd outside the bear exhibit. He'd been watching the bears, so I'd taken the chance to drink him in, and I'd immediately wished I were the type who could just walk up and introduce myself to someone.

Who do I have to donate to for someone to throw me to him?

Except I hadn't had to. A zoo's charity event, a curious zookeeper, and—I don't know—the cosmos or something, had given us an excuse to start talking. Now this seriously hot guy and I were walking together into the food pavilion, talking about how hilarious it was when a squirrel had gotten into someone's stroller by the penguin exhibit.

“People think they're stupid,” I was saying to Garrett. “But squirrels are fucking sharp. Have you seen the guy on YouTube who makes obstacle courses for them?”

His eyebrows shot up. “No? But now I want to.”

“Oh. Dude.” I gestured with my phone. “As soon as we sit down...”

And just like that, we had our food, were sitting at a plastic table near the edge of the pavilion, and were leaning in to watch videos on my phone.

“Oh my God!” A laugh burst out of Garrett as the squirrel on the screen traversed a suspension bridge between what amounted to two miniature funhouses. “This guy is a genius!”

“I know, right?” I chuckled as I reached for my orange soda. “His videos are wild. If I ever have a yard, I am so doing that.”

Garrett glanced at me. “I’ve known you for about fifteen minutes, and I already believe that. Completely.”

I tried to look suspicious as I paused the video and put my phone down. “Should I be offended by that?”

“Please.” He scoffed as he picked up his burger. “Turning your backyard into a playground for squirrels would be awesome. Hell, I’d do it, but I’m not great at building things.”

“No?”

Garrett shook his head. “Oh, man. My brother always jokes that I shouldn’t even be trusted with Legos, and I mean...” He grimaced. “He’s not wrong.”

“Seriously?”

He nodded. “I can come up with all kinds of cool ideas. Like if someone wanted to do that?” He gestured at my dormant phone as if to indicate the squirrel obstacles. “I could totally dream up ideas. Actually building them, though? Nuh-

uh.” He shook his head emphatically, then took a bite of his burger.

“The ideas are half the fun, though,” I said. “I enjoy building, and I could totally build some of the stuff like this guy does, but it would be so much more fun if I had someone to bounce ideas off.”

The smile on his lips was almost shy, even as mischief sparkled in his eyes. “Well, if you ever want to do a brainstorming session for ways to entertain squirrels...” He tapped his chest. “Hit me up.”

I laughed, pretending not to notice the way my heart accelerated at the thought of brainstorming squirrel shenanigans with him. And I completely ignored the part where I didn’t care what we were doing—I just really, really hoped I saw Garrett after today.

Please don’t let this be like connecting with a seatmate on a plane and then never seeing them again after we land.

Okay, I was being stupid. I was very much on the rebound. I knew nothing about Garrett except that he’d dated Kevin, was apparently incapable of building things, and was conscientious enough to ask if I minded him eating meat after I’d ordered something vegetarian.

“I mean, I get feeding the bears,” he’d said kind of awkwardly. “They’re... That’s what they eat. Does it bother you if *I* eat it around you, though?”

It didn’t—I was a mostly-vegetarian because I didn’t like the texture of meat—but I appreciated him trying to be courteous, especially since he took my “Nah, it’s fine” at face value and let the subject drop.

Unlike...say...

Kevin.

By the time we'd broken up, it *did* bother me when he ordered meat, not because I cared about what other people ate, but because I knew there would be a conversation about it.

"Are you sure you don't mind me ordering steak?"

"It's fine. It was fine the last time. And the time before that." Tight, annoyed smile. *"Don't worry about it."*

"Okay, okay." He'd show his palms in mock surrender. *"I just don't want you getting upset about me eating it in front of you."*

God. What did I ever see in that douchebag?

Though, now that I thought about it, I had to give credit where it was due. This was probably the best thing Kevin had ever done for me—be such an insufferable tool that both his ex-boyfriend *and* his ex-sidepiece had paid to name bear food after him.

"So, you're good at the building part?" Garrett asked, pulling me back into the present. "Like if you had plans for something like that"—another nod toward my phone—"you could pull it off?"

"Mhmm." I nibbled on a fry. "I don't have room for it right now, but I've always been pretty decent at putting things together as long as I have the space, the tools, and the materials."

Out of sheer habit, I cringed a little, fully expecting some snide remark to put me back in my place.

"Man." Garrett shook his head again. "I envy that."

"You—" I blinked. "You do?"

“Of course! God, my life would be so much easier if I could just—wait.” He suddenly peered at me, eyes narrowing slightly. “He gave you shit for that, didn’t he?”

Once again, I was caught off guard. “Huh?”

“Kevin.” Garrett studied me. “I told you I envied your ability to build, and you looked shocked.” He tsked and rolled his eyes. “He definitely fucked with your head about it, didn’t he?”

“I... Yeah. He, um... Yeah. He did.”

“Fucker,” Garrett muttered.

It took a second for my brain to catch up completely, and when it did, I almost asked how he’d guessed. Then I caught up a little more and answered my own question. Absently swirling my half-finished soda, I asked, “So what did he give you crap for?”

Garrett’s laugh was bitter. “What *didn’t* he give me crap for?”

“Ugh. Was that just his thing or something?”

“Pretty much.” Garrett took a sip from his own drink. “I thought it was just me for a while. Like I was really that much of a mess. Then I went to a family thing, and he does the same shit to his siblings and especially their spouses.”

I stared at him. “Seriously?”

“Mhmm. Anyone he feels like he’s competing with. Which, from what I’ve gathered, his parents kind of pitted all the kids against each other.”

“Wow. I’m, uh... I’m kind of glad I never met the family, then.”

“You’re lucky,” Garrett muttered. “His sisters and his brother are nice enough, but his parents... Well, that apple didn’t fall far from the tree. And I think meeting them was part of why I didn’t just bail on him ages ago.”

“Why’s that?”

“I felt sorry for him. Figured he wasn’t just a dick—he was the product of a toxic family.” Garrett gave another humorless laugh, but it sounded less caustic and more...sad? “I guess he brought out the white knight in me, and I thought if he was around more positive people—me, my friends, my family—then maybe he’d change.” He lifted his drink to his lips. “Should’ve known that was a lost cause.”

I grunted in agreement. “Yeah, I don’t think anyone’s changing him.”

“Not when he’s perfectly happy being...” Garrett flailed a hand. “*That.*”

“No kidding.”

We finished our lunch, and as I balled up the wrapper from my sandwich, my heart sank. Was this really over? Already? Damn. There was still a long walk back to the parking lot, so that would give me time to get his number. Assuming we’d parked in the same one and didn’t have to go in opposite directions. Crap. What if we had? I didn’t want this to be the last time I saw him, and—

“Do you want to walk around for a bit?” Garrett gestured toward the paths outside. “I haven’t been here in ages, and it’s a nice day.” He watched me as he waited for me to answer, his expression filled with trepidation as if he thought I might tell him to kick rocks or something.

Are you kidding? I wanted to exclaim. *It's animals and you—what more could I ask for?*

Somehow, I managed to hold on to my dignity. “Sure. Yeah.” I shrugged as if I weren’t six-year-old-on-the-way-to-Disneyland excited. “I’ve got all day.”

Oh, wow. The way his eyes lit up.

No, seriously. Say the word, and I'll stay here until they kick us out.

He opened his mouth like he was about to say something, but then he closed his eyes and exhaled. “Christ.” Some color bloomed in his cheeks as he looked at me and gave a quiet, self-deprecating chuckle. “I came here to feed him to a bear, and I’m still expecting him to rush me out the door.”

Yeah, we’d definitely dated the same guy, and I was suddenly pissed that Kevin had been such a dick to Garrett. I’d been bitter for a while now about how he’d treated me, but knowing he’d been multitasking and spreading his bullshit around to other guys—because let’s be real, Garrett and I probably weren’t the only ones—infuriated me.

We’d both wasted enough time and energy on him, though. “Well, to be fair,” I deadpanned, “I probably wouldn’t want to stay if you were feeding me to a bear either.”

Garrett’s laugh was surprisingly free and playful, and he had a wicked little glint in his eye as he nudged my foot with his. “I wouldn’t feed you to a bear.”

“Ooh, so I made a good impression?”

He snorted. “No. I just figure you’ll build your way out of the enclosure, and then I’ll go to jail.”

I couldn't help laughing louder than our mutual ex would have tolerated. That earned me a few curious looks from strangers, but also a cute smile from Garrett.

"Is that a challenge?" I asked, still grinning. "Because that would make a hell of a reality show now that I think about it."

His eyebrow rose, his lips still quirked with amusement. "A reality show?"

"Well, yeah," I said as I got up and started collecting my trash. "Toss someone into a bear enclosure with a few basic building materials, and see if they can build an escape before the bear does what bears do."

Garrett rose too. "Would anyone actually be able to win? Because I don't care how good you are at building, those fuckers are big, strong, and fast."

I flashed him a toothy grin as I dumped my trash into one of the bins. "Yeah, but fear is a hell of a motivator."

"Forget a reality show." Garrett dumped his trash, then put his tray on top of mine. "That's a horror movie right there."

"Even better!" I rubbed my hands together. "Then you can make the bears bigger, or make it a dinosaur or something."

"Or just turn the dinosaurs from *Jurassic Park* loose in a Home Depot and see what the people trapped inside with them can do."

"Ooh, that's brilliant." I chuckled as we headed out of the pavilion. "Billion-dollar idea, right there."

He responded with a beautiful, unrestrained laugh that could have powered this city for months.

And I decided right then and there that that dead fish was the best twenty bucks I'd ever spent.

CHAPTER 3

GARRETT

I WAS DREAMING.

That was the only possible explanation. Reality never found me falling so easily into conversation with someone I'd just met. Or being so in sync with them.

“Feel like grabbing lunch?” “Sure!”

“Want to walk around the zoo for a few hours?” “Let's do it!”

“Do you mind if we stop and watch the otters for a little while?” “Are you kidding—they're otters!”

I kept expecting Tristan to roll his eyes and tell me this was childish. That only children wanted to go to the damn zoo, never mind linger at this or that exhibit for any length of time. A Saturday, especially one this unseasonably nice, should be spent doing something like *hiking*.

Ugh. Just thinking about going on a hike had me biting back a groan. It wasn't that I was lazy or didn't like walking—I just didn't enjoy hiking. Particularly not the variety of hiking where we had to be there at the crack of dawn, marinate in bug spray, and walk at breakneck speed all the way up—because it was *always* up—to our destination. Just fucking *no*.

As we walked between exhibits, I glanced at Tristan. What if he was into that? What if that was how he and Kevin had connected? Because as miserable as it was to be with Kevin, there had to be something that kept them together just like there'd been a few things that kept Kevin and me together. In our case, it had been a shared love of cooking, similar taste in movies, and plenty of things we liked to do together when we weren't at work. As hard as it was to imagine now, our relationship wasn't all bad. I doubted Kevin's and Tristan's had been either.

So, what if they *had* bonded over a love of hiking?

That question needled at me all the way from the food pavilion to the otter exhibit to the savannah outlook, which was a raised platform with a view of a sprawling grassy hillside. All around us were zebras, giraffes, and various other animals enjoying the crisp but comfortable day.

There weren't a lot of people around, fortunately, so we were able to find a spot right at the railing. I tried to enjoy the view—I'd always enjoyed watching giraffes since they were so damn weird-looking—but that nagging question wouldn't leave me alone.

Did it even matter, though? Tristan and I had just met. We barely knew anything about each other. There was no telling if we were going to see each other ever again after today, or if we should just enjoy an afternoon at the zoo before tucking it away in our memories and going our separate ways.

But he was cute. And interesting. And funny. And his smiles and the way his eye contact lingered now and then made me think he might want to leave the zoo with my number in his phone.

Which meant it wouldn't hurt to put out a few feelers before we put in too much time or effort. See if there were any deal breakers.

As casually as I could, I put it out there: "Do you like hiking?"

Beside me, Tristan tensed. He shot me a suspicious look, and in an equally suspicious voice, he asked, "Why?"

"I, um..." I cleared my throat, taken aback by his reaction. "Just...curious?"

He flicked his gaze out to the savannah and chewed his lip. The suspicion in his expression ebbed a little in favor of discomfort, as if I'd put him on the spot instead of just asking a benign question.

And, well, given who we'd both dated, maybe I had. Especially since Tristan's relationship with Kevin hadn't ended very long ago, even the most innocuous of subjects could be a minefield. No one knew that better than me.

"I hate hiking," I blurted out.

His head snapped toward me, his eyes huge. "You do?"

"Yes." I exhaled as if I'd just confessed to something that had been weighing down on me for ages. "I fucking hate it."

Then Tristan released a breath, too, and he slumped over the railing he'd been leaning on. "Oh, thank God."

"What?"

"Are you kidding?" He huffed a laugh. "Who wouldn't hate hiking after being taken out on a damn death march every time the weather was decent?"

Laughter poured out of me, too, both from relief and this newfound facet of our camaraderie. “Right? Jesus, I swear I wanted to send hate mail to the weather forecasters every time they said a weekend was going to be nice.”

“Yes! Exactly!” Tristan rubbed a hand over his face. “And fuck me when he discovered those arctic-grade boots.”

I stared at him. “Oh no...”

“Yeah. Like, yeah, my feet did stay warm, but with as fast as he walks, I was out of breath half the time.” He grimaced. “My lungs hurt for hours after we got back.”

“Ugh, I know *that* feeling.” I shook my head and folded my arms on the railing beside Tristan. “I think I might actually enjoy hiking, but he completely killed it for me.”

“I bet he did,” Tristan muttered. “You were with him a lot longer than I was, so you probably put in a lot more miles on trails than I did.”

“Probably.” I kept my gaze fixed on a couple of antelope—I think they were antelope—grazing in the shadow of a giraffe. “Sometimes I kind of want to give it a try and see if I enjoy it without having to keep up a pace like that, but when I think about actually doing it...” I shook my head. “Nah.”

“I get it. It kind of loses its appeal after someone turns it into an extreme sport.”

“It so does!” God, what a relief—not that Tristan had been through the same bullshit, but that he got it. “Everyone acts like hiking is the most amazing thing ever, and I swear, saying ‘I don’t like hiking’ is like saying I don’t like beaches or kittens.”

“Right?” Tristan exhaled sharply. “If people like outdoor stuff, cool. But it’s not... It isn’t a virtue, you know? It’s a

hobby.”

Someone got it. Holy crap.

“*Do* you like outdoor stuff?” I asked cautiously. “Not... Obviously not Kevin-style hiking, but in general?”

He turned a sly smile on me. “Well, we’re outdoors right now, aren’t we?”

“You know what I mean.” I bumped his shoulder playfully with mine. “*Outdoor* stuff. Camping. Kayaking. All the shit everyone on dating apps is allegedly into.”

I’d known this man for all of an hour, and I’d already decided I would never get tired of the way he laughed.

“I guess I like...” He shrugged, pressing his elbow onto the railing and meeting my gaze. “Kayaking can be fun. Biking. But I’m more of a go-with-the-flow kind of guy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like if I’m with someone and we just want to hang out and watch movies, I’m in. But then the next day, we get a hair up our ass and decide to go skydiving, I’m game.”

I stared at him. “*Have* you gone skydiving?”

“Not yet.” He chuckled. “I almost suggested it to His Highness once, but then I realized he’d probably decide we had to do a HALO jump or something, and...” Tristan wrinkled his nose.

“Oh, he totally would,” I said, snickering. “A hundred percent. Or if you said you wanted to go snorkeling, he’d immediately say, ‘fuck it, let’s learn to scuba dive and go out in a shark cage.’”

“Yes. Holy shit.” Tristan groaned. “Man, I’m not thrilled you dealt with his crap, but it’s seriously good to meet someone who gets it. Because none of my friends...” He trailed off, shaking his head.

“Eh, that’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

“It isn’t?”

“No.” I shifted my gaze out to the animals again, watching a zebra nibbling on a weed. “Because it takes a while for people on the outside to pick up on that stuff. If he’s been around you and your friends long enough for them to pick up the patterns, then he’s been around for *way* too long.”

“Huh. I hadn’t thought about it like that.”

“I’ll give the man credit—he does put a lot of things into perspective.”

Tristan huffed. “That’s a funny way to say he ruins a lot of shit.”

“Not wrong,” I muttered.

“Hiking can’t be as bad as hiking with Kevin, though,” he said. “Otherwise, people wouldn’t do it. Would they? Or are they all masochists?”

“Have you ever met an avid hiker who *isn’t* a masochist?”

He pursed his lips as if he were giving it some serious thought, and then we both laughed. Truth was, I had no doubt some people genuinely enjoyed hiking. It just wasn’t my cup of tea. Or, well, it wasn’t now that I’d hiked with Kevin.

“I think I might’ve enjoyed it more if we’d, like, slowed down,” I said. “Stopped and looked at things once in a while instead of...” I motioned like something zooming past.

“*Seriously*,” Tristan said. “Getting to the top of a trail in time to watch the sun rise between these two specific trees the way they only would once every seventy years or whatever...” He waved a hand, and he probably rolled his eyes. “Yeah, it was cool. We got some great pictures. But it was about a minute of awesome sunbeams after four hours of a grueling hike that still had my damn legs shaking.”

I snorted. “Hey, at least he found *some* way to make your legs shake.”

A sharp *ahem* turned my head, and I found myself meeting the glare of a middle-aged woman. She had three kids with her who were way too young to understand my comment, but that didn’t stop her from trying to murder me with her mind. I offered an apologetic shrug. She sighed sharply and led her kids away.

Beside me, Tristan smothered a laugh. I pressed my lips together and snickered. Nearby, someone else laughed; I didn’t know if they’d actually heard what I’d said, or if they were just amused by the woman’s indignant reaction, but whatever. It was funny.

Voice quieter, Tristan said, “He wasn’t *that* bad.” Beat. “Was he?”

“Are we still talking about hiking?”

“No, we are not.”

I thought about it. “Okay, no, I guess he wasn’t. But it’s way more fun to imagine him being bad at everything since he’s a scumbag.”

Tristan said nothing. He just put up his fist, and when I bumped it, we exchanged conspiratorial grins before turning our attention back to the animals.

No, Kevin hadn't been *that* bad. I hadn't just stuck around because he'd gaslit me into believing all the problems were either my fault or in my head (though that had certainly been a factor). There were good times. He'd taught me how to make a perfect steak. He'd been a shoulder to lean on when my dad had a serious health scare. He'd given me the words of encouragement I'd needed before I interviewed for the job I had now. He wasn't a mustache-twirling, black-hat-wearing cartoon villain.

But he *had* worked me over enough to justify putting his name on that fish. He'd clearly been a douche to Tristan. So, I wasn't going to feel bad if I spent today remembering him for all the bullshit he'd pulled and commiserating with Tristan about it.

Oh, if you could only see us now, Kevin.

The thought drove a laugh out of me.

Tristan turned, looking puzzled.

I thought about brushing it off and pretending it was nothing. Then I thought about it, and...why the hell not?

Grinning, I took out my phone. "Want to get a selfie? I'm sure we have a mutual friend who'd love to see it."

Evil glee filled his expression. "Hell yeah." He motioned toward the animals. "Should we get them in the background?"

"Absolutely." I leaned back against the railing. Tristan turned beside me. His shoulder touched mine, which almost made me forget how to operate my camera.

"Hey, do you guys want a picture?" a woman asked. "I can take one for you?"

“Would you mind?” I offered my phone. “Thanks so much!”

“No problem!” She took the phone and stepped back a little.

Without thinking about it, I put my arm around Tristan’s shoulders. Then his was around my waist.

“Okay, smile!” She tapped the screen. “There you go.” Handing back the phone, she added, “You two are so cute together.”

My face instantly heated as I took back the phone. “Oh. Uh. Thanks. We just...” Why was I explaining myself? Or trying to downplay this? She had no idea who we were. So, I just smiled. “Thank you again.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“How do we look?” Tristan craned his neck to look at the screen, unaware of what he was doing to my pulse by standing this close to me.

I fumbled with the phone, but managed to pull up the photo. It was...oh, man, it was cute, and not just because of the giraffe photobombing us. I actually had Tristan’s smile preserved for posterity in my phone. How cool was that?

“Oh, Kevin’s gonna *hate* this!” Tristan started to lift his head. “We should definitely send—” He stopped abruptly when our eyes met. Holy shit, we were close, and I was pretty sure he’d noticed too.

I swallowed, quickly dropping my gaze to the phone. “Yeah. Yeah, he’s...” I had to force the laugh just to get my breath moving. “He’s going to be pissed.”

Subtly, Tristan opened up some space between us, and I couldn't decide if I was relieved or disappointed, just that I could finally breathe again. Sort of. What was wrong with me?

He cleared his throat. "Should, um... Should we send it?"

I stared at the phone, then met his gaze from what was now a safer distance. "Not yet. He'll just start blowing up our phones." I slipped mine into my back pocket. "I'm having a good day, so I'd rather not hear from him."

"Good point." He chewed his lip and looked at me through his lashes. "Would you mind sending it to *me*, though?"

"Oh. No. Definitely not." I pulled my phone back out. "Can I get your—" My tongue suddenly stuck to the roof of my mouth as I realized what I'd been casually asking.

Tristan's smile made my knees tremble more than one of Kevin's uphill forced marches. "You probably need my number, don't you?"

I nodded mutely.

He held out his hand.

Too stupid to speak in that moment, I opened the text app, then handed him the phone. He entered his number and gave back the phone, and I sent him the photo.

When his text tone pinged, I got the weirdest but most exhilarating rush. We'd exchanged numbers. He had my number. I had his. Holy shit.

And I'm a grown man who shouldn't be acting like a freshman flirting for the first time. What the hell?

Oblivious to what was going on in my brain, Tristan met my gaze, his cheeks glowing with a renewed blush. "Is, um... Do you spell your name with one T or two?"

Did I... Oh, shit. He was saving my contact.

Whoa.

“Two,” I croaked. “Two Rs, two Ts.”

That smile as he typed in my name. Oh God.

And why wasn't I entering *his* name into *my* contacts?

I almost dropped my damn phone.

After a little fumbling and forgetting how to type, though, I had Tristan saved as a contact. Then we exchanged smiles and continued walking.

Maybe it was a little premature, but...

I was pretty sure this was already the best Valentine's Day I'd ever had.

CHAPTER 4

TRISTAN

I WAS the biggest dork on the planet, and I didn't care.

Exhibit A: Grown ass adult wandering the zoo with the same wide-eyed enthusiasm as the kids all around us instead of the indulgent patience of their parents.

Exhibit B: Wanting to check my phone every two seconds to confirm that, yes, I really had exchanged numbers with Garrett.

I kept that second part under wraps, though, if only so he didn't catch on that I was this much of a dork. Even if he'd seemed kind of shy and excited about it, too—as if we hadn't just been going through the logistics so we could get that photo from his phone to mine. Maybe he was as much of a dork as I was? But I'd err on the side of caution and try to be sort of composed and dignified before I really let that side of me show.

What could I say, though? After that asshole who'd warranted naming a salmon, I'd kind of convinced myself I was done dating. Deep down, I'd known that was irrational and that I was probably just grieving the relationship. I'd been licking my wounds, and I'd learned from my previous ex's aftermath that that period could sure feel like it was going to

last forever. Never going to date again. All guys were dicks. Time to take a vow of celibacy. All that shit.

I'd known on some level that I'd get through it, but today was the first time I genuinely felt like it was behind me. I could still be attracted to someone. I could flirt. I could connect. Even if this was a one day only show, it was fun, and it was a relief, and as Garrett and I walked away from the savannah, I gave myself permission to just fucking enjoy it. Maybe something would come of it. Maybe it wouldn't. But the day would be a blast, and I'd let myself get little hearts in my eyes every time he so much as looked at me, and I'd go to sleep tonight with a huge smile on my face.

Abruptly, Garrett halted, and I almost stumbled. "What?"

He looked at me with a completely serious expression, though there was a devilish sparkle in his eyes as he gestured ahead of us. "I'm not sure it's safe to go in there with you."

I followed where he was indicating, and my gaze landed on a sign above where the path forked: *Snow leopards*.

"Of course it's safe!" I grinned at him. "They're in an enclosure!"

"They are." He was still clearly dubious, but the corner of his mouth was trying desperately to twitch upward. "Says the guy who wants a reality show about people building their way out of enclosures with dangerous animals."

"Right. Building their way *out*, not *in*."

His eyebrow rose. "Uh-huh. And bridges don't go two ways."

I batted my eyelashes as innocently as I could, which got me the desired effect: a gorgeous laugh.

“Okay, okay.” He rolled his eyes, though he was still smiling. “We’ll go look at the cats. But no ‘here kitty, kitty,’ okay?”

I tsked. “You’re no fun.”

“Yeah, yeah. Do you want to look at the snow leopards or not?”

“Pfft. What kind of question is that?” I elbowed him, and we started toward the snow leopard enclosure.

I tried not to get my hopes up on the way in here. Every time I’d been to this zoo, the snow leopards had been sleeping or otherwise out of sight. The best I’d ever seen was a gray-and-black spotted rump between some rocks.

Hope sprang eternal, though, so I followed the winding path with Garrett.

And...

“Holy shit.” I stared slack-jawed into the enclosure. “They have *babies*?”

“Apparently they do.”

Yeah. They did. Three of them. They must’ve been a few months old at least, because they were past the clumsy, fuzzy kitten stage. Definitely babies, though, and definitely active.

From on top of a rock, with her long, thick tail twitching, the mother watched her three...kittens? Cubs? Whatever they were, they clearly had energy to burn, and they bounced and zoomed all over the enclosure like someone had spiked their food with catnip. One pounced on another, and they tumbled down a small slope before they started chasing each other over trees and rocks. The third was stalking Mom’s tail, crouched down and wiggling its butt like a housecat pursuing a laser

pointer. It finally attacked, startling its mother and earning a swat from one of her huge paws.

“Oh my God.” I stared out at the cats. “This is the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah.” Garrett was barely whispering. “It really is.”

I glanced at him, then did a double take.

He wasn’t watching the snow leopards.

He was watching *me*.

I blinked. “What?”

“I...” He shook himself, turning back toward the leopards, but he couldn’t hide the blush. “Sorry. I, uh...”

Sorry? For what?

My heart was suddenly going wild, and not because I was so excited to be watching baby snow leopards. “Garrett?”

He chewed his lip, but he didn’t look at me. He seemed to be flailing for something to say.

I rewound the last thirty seconds or so, and the way he’d been looking at me in that moment made my spine tingle. Did he... Was he...

I swallowed.

What if I...

Heart absolutely pounding so hard I couldn’t even hear the leopards running around anymore, I closed some of the space between us. He tensed, holding his breath, but he didn’t move away from me.

Then, hoping like hell I wasn’t reading this all wrong, I slid my hand across the small of his back.

Garrett closed his eyes as he pushed out a breath.

“This okay?” I asked. It sounded so stupid to my ears, but I wanted to be sure I wasn’t misreading him. That I wasn’t crossing a line he wanted left alone.

“Yeah.” His eyes fluttered open, and when he looked at me this time, the heat in his gaze made my breath hitch. “Yeah, it’s fine.”

“Yeah?”

He nodded. “Just, um...” He gulped, then laughed nervously and faced the snow leopard enclosure again. “I’m sorry. I haven’t even tried to... Ever since Kevin, I’ve...”

“Really?”

Another nod as he swept his tongue across his lips. “Just wasn’t ready. Wanted to move on, and...” He shook his head and turned to me once more. “I might be a little out of practice.”

“You and me both.”

We locked eyes. His leather jacket kept his body heat from reaching my hand, but the contact was still enough to make my head spin. Question was... What now? Because it wasn’t like we were in a club where everyone around us was making out and feeling each other up. This was definitely not the venue for anything like that. And even in clubs, I usually had to follow the other guy’s lead because I’d always been nervous about making any kind of move. This? Touching Garrett’s back? That was probably the boldest thing I’d ever done—yeah, I know, I sucked at this—and I had no idea what either of us should do next.

Then Garrett laughed and shook his head, turning toward the snow leopards as if he couldn’t hold my gaze anymore. I

froze, not sure if this was my cue to pull my hand away or what. I may have been a grown ass adult, but I sucked at this.

“I’m sorry.” He wiped a hand over his face before resting his palm on the railing. “I suck at... Well, all of this.”

Thank God it wasn’t just me.

“Same.” Maybe this was too much, though, especially since we were out in public, so I lightened the touch on his back, then started to draw my hand away.

“Don’t,” he whispered.

I froze again. “Don’t...what?”

He swallowed. With what seemed like some serious effort, he met my gaze. “Unless you don’t want to.”

Despite the clumsiness of the exchange, I followed. “No, I do.” Even as I let my hand rest more firmly on his back, I gave a quiet, self-deprecating laugh. “I’d like to tell you I’m only bad at this because I’m out of practice, but...”

His eyebrows rose. “Yeah?”

I nodded, staring out at the leopards because I couldn’t handle his scrutiny. Not while my face was burning like this. “I’ve, um... I’ve never been good at any of it. I don’t know what I would’ve done in the era before dating apps.”

“Oh, God. I don’t even want to think about that.” Garrett shifted a little, a motion I was acutely aware of because of that small point of mind-blowing contact. “And I don’t really do the hookup thing, so even the apps are kind of a nightmare.”

I started to speak, but some movement behind me turned my head. Garrett and I both glanced back as a family started up the walkway toward the enclosure. I quickly pulled my hand back and slid it into my jacket pocket, and we moved to

one side so the excited kids could have a look at the snow leopards.

In my pocket, my hand tingled where my skin had been pressed to the leather of his jacket, and I itched to reclaim that contact.

Not now, though. We were two queer men in public. Couldn't be too careful.

But goddamn, I didn't want to be careful right then. I'd been completely over the idea of dating and connecting, but then Garrett had fallen out of the sky, and all that went out the window. Forget being shy or nervous or still licking my wounds after Kevin. I wanted to be outgoing—hell, *reckless*—even if it meant doing some fumbling and getting stupid over every little thing like a kid with his first crush. I liked that feeling. I missed it. I missed chemistry and flirting and *not* walking on eggshells, and if that reduced me to a fifteen-year-old putting out feelers for the first time, then...fuck it. I could be fifteen again—awkwardly clueless, ridiculously giddy, and completely ignorant of how much someone could stomp on my heart.

I could have fun with an attractive guy I'd just met.

Hell yeah.

The family who'd joined us at the snow leopard enclosure only stuck around for a couple of minutes before the kids—inexplicably bored after watching leopard kittens running around—decided they wanted to go somewhere else. In their defense, “somewhere else” was the lion exhibit, though I doubted there were baby lions. Maybe? We'd have to check that out.

Not yet, though, because there was probably a ton of people over there, and for whatever reason, almost nobody was coming up this way. Their loss. I was happy to stay with Garrett and the snow leopards.

Especially Garrett.

Who I was now alone with.

I started to slide my hand out of my pocket, fully intending to put it on his back again because I was tired of not touching him and—

He kissed me.

His hands were warm on the sides of my neck, his breath a cool rush across my cheek, and his lips...oh God.

Gentle. Maybe a little tentative. As if he'd come this far but needed me to take the lead from here.

Don't mind if I do.

Still listening in case someone came up the walkway, I wrapped my arms around him and dragged my lower lip across his. We didn't go too crazy—didn't turn this into something that would justifiably get the cops called on us—but this soft, long kiss had the whole world shifting under my feet. The way his fingertips twitched on the back of my neck. The downright decadent way he teased my lips with just the very tip of his tongue. That low moan that I felt more than heard.

If this was how Garrett kissed when he had to be mindful that we were in public, then I wanted—*needed*—to know what would happen behind closed doors.

He broke the kiss, and the fire in his eyes mirrored the one suddenly burning in me. It wasn't just sexual, either. Yeah, I

wanted to get him alone and naked, but I also wanted to know every last thing about him. I wanted him to know every last thing about me, including the ugly parts and the things *someone* had convinced me to tuck away in shame.

We'd known each other for less than a day, so this wasn't love or even infatuation, but it was something. Whatever it was, I wanted to ride it as far as it would go, and from the way he was looking at me—expression full of wonder and hunger and God knew what else—that desire was mutual.

A stunned and maybe delirious little smile formed on his face. "Sorry. I, uh..." He swept his tongue across his faintly swollen lips. "I just couldn't resist."

"Don't apologize." Wow, I was out of breath. "Just, um... Just caught me by surprise, that's all."

His smile came fully to life, screwing with my balance, my common sense, and everything keeping me from giving in to the impulse to drag him down on the nearest horizontal surface. I wouldn't give in to that, but damn, the temptation was strong. Strong enough it almost made me laugh out loud at this whole absurd scenario. I'd lost my damn mind, and I *loved* it. After being down and depressed for so long about... about... whatever I'd been down and depressed about, I was all in right now. Ready to jump in headfirst and see what happened.

I licked my lips. "Do you want to stay here? Or...?"

"Like stay here by the..." He nodded toward the baby snow leopards, who were currently stalking a leaf while their mom watched. "Or stay at the zoo?"

"Either or."

He quirked his lips. Then he met me with a grin that was somehow sly, shy, and everything in between. “As tempting as it is to suggest going someplace else, I’m enjoying this.” He half-shrugged and added a soft, “Any reason we have to rush it?”

Oh, this man was speaking my language. Yeah, we both knew what we wanted, but he was right—walking around this park together was also fun. There would be time to jump his bones later.

And we’ll probably both be absolutely losing it by the time we get into bed if we wait a little longer.

Fuck yeah.

I grinned. “No need to rush on my account.” I gestured around us. “I mean, we’re already here.”

“Yeah. We are. So do we keep walking?” He nodded toward the snow leopards. “Or do you want to keep watching the kitties?”

I laughed, sliding my arm around his waist. “Let’s keep watching them. That’ll give me more time to convince them to let me pet them.”

He chuckled, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. The kiss he pressed to my temple damn near melted me.

Kitties? What kitties?

CHAPTER 5

GARRETT

IT WASN'T EVEN NOON YET, and today had already been a whirlwind. I still couldn't believe I'd kissed him. That wasn't usually my style. Not that soon. Not that impulsively. But it was so good, and it soothed some of that tension that had been brewing between us since we'd met outside the bear pen. As if we both still wanted each other—holy fuck, I wanted him so bad—but now that we'd confirmed that the desire was mutual, we could put a pin in it.

“Okay, we’re definitely on the same page,” we seemed to be saying to each other. *“So now we can just enjoy the rest of the day without wondering.”*

As we continued through the zoo, I was a mix of relaxed and restless. I no longer wondered if I was imagining the attraction between us, and getting that out of the way let me get in the groove and live in the moment. At the same time, there was no denying that part of me wanted to get him alone somewhere.

I didn't mind. It felt good, having that unavoidable desire constantly sparking along my nerve endings. My libido was wide awake now, and I reveled in wanting someone. As frustrating as it was to know the clothes were staying on for a few more hours, it was sexy and fun too.

Walking along the path from the Australia exhibits to the exotic bird aviary, I realized I'd never experienced this before. On the very, very rare occasion I'd had a confirmed mutual attraction with someone, we'd done everything we could to get from Point A to Bed B, and then afterward, we got dressed and went our separate ways. With the three guys I'd actually dated, there'd been that long and kind of exciting-but-stressful period of dancing around each other, trying to figure out if we really were into each other, and eventually, we made it into bed.

Bottom line, I didn't just throw myself into bed with a man I'd just met unless that was *all* I wanted.

This thing I was doing with Tristan—wanting him right the hell now but also hoping he'd stick around after the orgasms—was completely new. It probably wouldn't be long before we wound up naked together, but I didn't want to rush into bed *too* quickly. After all, we wouldn't get this first-time frisson again, so why not enjoy it?

At the exotic birds exhibit, he turned to me. “Do you want to go in?”

I shrugged. “Why not? I love birds.”

“Yeah, but they're flying around loose. Some people aren't into that.”

“In this case, I am definitely *not* some people.” I opened the door and gestured for him to go ahead. “This sounds amazing.”

His face lit up as if he'd been absolutely expecting me to veto this. Christ, was he used to people raining on his parade at every—

Oh. Right. He'd dated Kevin.

Man, fuck you, Kevin.

I shut the door behind us, and per the signs posted all around us, we made sure no one was on their way in before we stepped through the second door.

That took us into a huge aviary full of noisy, colorful birds in trees, on the sides of the enclosure, and on perches that had been set up everywhere. Parrots, cockatiels, and some smaller birds I couldn't identify squawked, played with toys, and tried to con people out of treats.

One swooped past Tristan's head, making him duck, and we both laughed.

"Jesus!" He glanced warily after the bird—a large blue parrot, it turned out—who'd buzzed him. "They're fearless, aren't they?"

"That was probably a warning." I nudged his shoe with mine. "I bet they can smell cat on you."

Tristan rolled his eyes. "Yeah, maybe if I'd been able to *pet* one of the cats, but I didn't, which is a total scam."

"Yes, it's absolutely a scam that the zoo prevented you from losing an arm or something."

"I wouldn't have lost an arm. Cats *like* getting their chins scratched."

I arched an eyebrow. He chuckled and bumped my shoulder. "Act like you wouldn't pet a snow leopard if you had the opportunity."

"Uh...maybe. My cats abuse me enough, thank you."

His eyes lit up. "Oh, you have cats?"

"Mmhmm." I whipped out my phone, because what else would I do when someone asked about my boys? Especially

someone who clearly liked cats? I pulled up my lock screen and showed it to him. “This is Elvis and Armani.”

Tristan glanced up at me as he took the phone. “Elvis and Armani.”

I shrugged. “That’s what the shelter named them.”

“Ah. Okay. They do kind of run out of names after a while, don’t they?” He looked at the screen, and the shift in his expression completely melted me. “Oh my God. They’re *so cute*.” He met my gaze again. “Any idea what they are? Like their breeds? Oh, you said they’re shelter cats.”

“A friend of mine who knows cats thinks Armani might be a Himalayan or something. He’s got the coloring and the smooshed nose, and he’s pretty big. Elvis?” I shrugged. “No idea. He’s kind of your typical orange tabby—really cuddly and affectionate, but not super smart.”

“Yeah? Are they really stupid?”

“My vet says all orange cats share one brain cell.” I gestured at my phone. “Elvis doesn’t do much to dispel that, let’s put it that way.”

He chuckled, looking at the screen again. “They’re really cute. Seriously. How do you ever even leave the house?”

“Well, I do work at home, so I don’t have to leave that much. Unless, you know, there’s an event at the zoo involving bears and salmon...”

Tristan laughed as he handed back my phone. “Hey. Priorities.”

“Right?” Pocketing my phone, I added, “Do you think it’s weird, looking at cat pictures while we’re surrounded by birds?”

“Why would it be weird?” He slid his hands into his jacket pockets and looked around. “It isn’t like we’re menacing the birds with the—oh Jesus!” He jumped, but recovered quickly as a small green parrot landed in his hair. “That’s... Please tell me that’s a bird.”

“No.” I took out my phone again and opened the camera app. “It’s a type of monkey that’s evolved to have wings.”

He flipped me off, which made the photo even funnier. The parrot didn’t seem to notice or care that it was standing on a person’s head. It was way more interested in checking out the view from its current perch.

A zookeeper in khaki came over, walking quickly but casually as if she didn’t want to alarm us or the birds. “That’s Bobby. He’s a monk parakeet, and he’s pretty mellow, so just don’t startle him, and he’ll be fine.”

“I’m not worried about him attacking me,” Tristan mused. “But I’d just as soon he didn’t use my hair as a toilet.”

The zookeeper—Krissy, according to her nametag—laughed, sounding vaguely nervous, and didn’t do anything to assuage his concern.

Tristan sobered. “He’s, um... He’s not going to do that, is he?”

She schooled her expression (sort of). “It’s always a possibility. Him or any of the other birds in here.”

Tristan scowled, but didn’t make any move to encourage the bird to leave. I suspected he wouldn’t be *thrilled* if Bobby crapped on him, but I couldn’t imagine him doing something to hurt or scare him as a result. For as little as I knew about Tristan given how recently we’d met, I was completely confident this was a person who would bend over backwards

to *not* hurt or scare an animal. The kind of guy who'd accidentally step on a dog's paw or a cat's tail and then fall all over himself to apologize and soothe the animal because he felt terrible about it.

That shouldn't have been a novelty—everyone should be like that, as far as I was concerned—but Tristan was so adorable and earnest about animals, and I loved it. Especially after...

Ugh. No. I didn't need to think about that asshole—or his dislike of animals—any more today.

Though now that I thought about it, it *was* kind of appropriate to feed something with his name on it to an animal.

I wonder if the meerkat exhibit still has cockroaches available...

The parrot in Tristan's hair departed abruptly. Tristan chuckled and ran a hand through his hair. "Oh, thank God. He didn't leave anything behind."

"Well, even if he had," Krissy said brightly, "it could be worse." She pointed at a huge macaw, who was valiantly trying to dismantle a toy that was almost as brightly colored as he was.

"Yeah, no thanks," Tristan said. "My mom had a parakeet for a while. That was bad enough."

"One of the other zookeepers has a toucan." Krissy grimaced. "They're absolutely lovely as pets, but they make a mess. Especially when they bite down on a berry or a piece of fruit." She gestured like something splattering everywhere.

"Yeah, see, that's why toucans and parrots make great pets for *other* people." Tristan slid his hands into his pockets again.

“I can come over, fawn all over them, talk about how I wish I had one, and then go home while someone else has to deal with all the, uh...logistics.”

“Sort of like kids,” I said, then instantly regretted it, since not everyone had the same sense of humor I did about how I’d much prefer to be the cool uncle than a dad.

To my surprise and relief, though, both Krissy and Tristan laughed.

“Eh, you’re not wrong.” Krissy shrugged. “My cockatiels don’t demand to watch the same cartoons over and over like my nieces do.” She pursed her lips. “On the other hand, they mimic every annoying sound on the planet, including the cartoons my nieces watch, so...”

“Mhmm.” I nodded. “This is why I have cats.”

“Ugh, I’m jealous of both of you,” Tristan grumbled. “Logistics aside, I want *some* kind of pet.”

I blinked. “You don’t have any?” With the way he clearly adored animals, I’d fully expected him to have a whole menagerie.

Sighing, he shook his head. “Landlord won’t even let me get a damn fish.”

Krissy’s shoulders fell, and she grimaced sympathetically. “Oh, that’s rough. I was super lucky to find a landlord who lets me have my birds, but God help me if I ever have to move.”

“Right?” Tristan rolled his eyes. “My last landlord was fine with pets, but then before I got around to getting one, I gave up that place to live with my ex. He didn’t like animals at all, which, looking back, should’ve been a huge red flag.”

Krissy and I both nodded. Disliking animals was definitely a red flag for me, but I'd overlooked it for some stupid reason with the man who had apparently also kept Tristan from getting a pet.

Yet another reason to dislike him—depriving such an animal lover of some kind of furry or feathered companion.

I cleared my throat. “You know, I think they’re still doing that thing where you can name a cockroach after your ex and feed it to the meerkats.” I gestured out of the aviary. “We should do that.”

“Oh, you should.” Krissy grinned. “Last year it was dead mice for the king cobra. It was so satisfying watching that thing eat a mouse named after my ex-fiancé.”

“That would be awesome!” Tristan said. “I’m not sure if that would beat the bears eating fish this morning, but I’m all for trying everything. You know—for science.”

“For science,” Krissy said with a sage nod. She motioned toward the aviary’s exit. “The meerkats are about... Well, go out that way, and take your second left. If you see the mountain lions, you’ve gone too far.”

“That’s some advice that might be a little unsettling out of context,” I said.

She giggled. “Oh, yeah, I was on the phone with a colleague once while I was home, and some kids heard me telling someone to go left at the lions and walk past the tigers. They were horrified.”

“I’d have been eavesdropping to figure out where it was,” Tristan said. “Show me to the lions and tigers!”

“Oh my God.” I groaned and rolled my eyes, but I was still smiling. “You really are going to die right after saying, ‘here,

kitty, kitty.”

He gave an unrepentant shrug. “Probably.”

Krissy shook her head. “You and half the staff here.”

“Really?” he asked. “I figured you’d all be, like, adults when it came to animals.”

“Pfft. We respect them, but none of us got into this job because we didn’t like being around them. We’re suckers for cute too.” She paused. “Though usually not for the animals we work with on a daily basis. I’m extra cautious around the birds but would probably get my skull kicked in by a giraffe. One of the gorilla keepers is an absolute sucker for elephants. And we’re all pretty much taking bets on how long before one of the flamingo guys loses a finger to the red pandas.” She laughed. “It’s, uh, probably just as well we’re only allowed into the enclosures for the animals we’re actually assigned to.”

“Giraffes. Red pandas. Cats.” Tristan sighed dramatically. “Why did I go to school and get into IT? Why? What the hell was I thinking when I could’ve made money doing...” He gestured around us, which ended up startling the hell out of a cockatoo who none of us had seen swooping down from a tree. It squawked and changed direction, and Tristan’s eyes immediately widened in horror. “Oh shit! I’m sorry! I totally scared him!”

“She’s fine.” Krissy nodded toward the bird in question. “She’s kind of a daredevil and likes to startle people, so it happens all the time. Trust me, she’s okay.”

The cockatoo did seem to be just fine, having quickly engrossed herself in trying to pry something out of a toy attached to the tree.

“Still.” Tristan looked absolutely mortified. “I didn’t mean to scare her!”

“She’ll be fine,” Krissy assured him. “She was probably going to land on your shoulder, and I *guarantee* she would’ve made a mess of your shirt.”

He was still clearly unconvinced. Apparently, I was right—he really was the type who’d feel awful if he accidentally stepped on a paw or a tail. Or startled an animal. Maybe he’d die trying to pet something he shouldn’t, but he sure wouldn’t be attacked for being mean to something.

And you were an asshole to him, Kevin? What the fuck is wrong with you?

I put my hand on Tristan’s back like he’d done to me over by the snow leopards, and his features softened as he turned to me. That beautiful smile came back, though some concern still lingered.

“Cockatoos are dinosaurs,” I told him. “She’s probably just plotting all the ways she’ll rip you to pieces if she ever finds you in a dark alley. Pretty sure she’s fine.”

That got a laugh out of him, and he snaked an arm around my waist. “Great. Now a bird has a grudge against me. She’ll probably attack me if I come back in here.”

“Do birds hold grudges?” I asked.

“They can,” Krissy said. “A friend of mine had a cat who caught a barn swallow in their stable. After that, the other swallows would dive-bomb him every time he went into the barn. None of the other cats—just him.”

“Oh. Awesome.” Tristan groaned theatrically and rolled his eyes. “Forget dying because I tried to pet a kitty—I’m going to get murdered by a bird with a vendetta.”

All three of us laughed.

Then Krissy put up her hand and whistled. A few of the birds glanced our way, but the cockatoo in question hopped off her perch and flew over. Both Tristan and I took a step back from the wind she'd kicked up with her wings, and then she settled on Krissy's hand.

“She doesn't have a grudge.” Krissy stroked the bird's back. “She's got a good memory, but stuff like that? I think she's half goldfish.”

I eyed the cockatoo dubiously. “She likes being caught and petted? She's not...wild?”

“Not like some of the other birds here.” Krissy gave the cockatoo a gentle scratch on the side of her neck, and the bird closed her eyes and leaned into it like one of my cats would. “She was hatched and hand-fed in captivity, and then confiscated from a group smuggling exotic pets. She's been carefully socialized so she can be around other birds, but she'd never survive in the wild, so she lives here.”

“Oh.” Tristan looked around. “Do they... Do they like it here?”

“They do. They get a ton of stimulation so they don't get bored, and they have quieter places to relax. Plus, they have food and veterinary care, so they pretty much just play, preen, and talk to each other. Obviously, living in the wild is ideal, but for animals that can't be released, this is an excellent alternative.”

“Wow. Seems like this zoo has a lot of animals like that—the ones that can't be released.”

Krissy nodded, watching herself scratch the other side of the bird's neck. “They're safe and cared for, and it helps

educate people about conservation, not to mention why certain animals shouldn't be pets and why animals who are pets should be ethically sourced."

"That's amazing," I said. "They do seem pretty happy in here."

"They are." She laughed softly as she smoothed the feathers she'd ruffled. "Some might be a little spoiled."

"As all animals should be." Tristan paused. "Can, I um..." He gestured at the cockatoo. "Can I pet her?"

"Sure! Offer up your hand like this first." She held her own hand in front of the bird's beak. "When she gives you a little nudge, then you can pet her like this." She ran her hand over the bird's beak, head, and back. "Just make sure you move slowly and touch her gently."

Somehow, I didn't think Tristan needed anyone to tell him that, though I understood why she said it.

As she'd said, Tristan offered his hand. The cockatoo eyed it, cocking her head to one side, then the other. Then she bent forward and nudged his hand with her beak. He let her inspect his palm and fingers for a moment. When he was apparently satisfied that she'd let him, he petted her the way he'd been instructed.

"See?" Krissy smiled. "She's not mad at you."

"Good. I don't need any dinosaurs holding grudges against me."

"Hey, you never know." I slid my hand up his back. "Stuff like that could keep life interesting."

"Uh-huh." He rolled his eyes, but he was chuckling.

After he'd gotten his fix and seemed convinced the bird really had forgiven him, we thanked Krissy for chatting with us and headed out of the aviary.

“So.” He turned a mischievous grin on me as we stepped into the anteroom between the aviary and outside. “Should we go see if the meerkats are hungry?”

CHAPTER 6

TRISTAN

THE MEERKAT EXHIBIT was indeed still doing the cockroaches named after exes thing, but not until 3:30.

We left donations and named two of the dead bugs after our ex, then continued wandering around to kill a couple of hours. I kept expecting Garrett to get impatient or bored. He *had* to have better things to do on a Saturday than spend it at a zoo with a guy he'd just met.

If he was bored, he was damn good at hiding it. In fact, I swear I spent half the time gazing at him in wonder instead of watching the animals, because I just couldn't get over the fact that he was clearly enjoying this as much as I was.

We spent a solid half hour in the night house, watching huge porcupines shuffle around while a couple of fruit bats argued over something up by the ceiling. At another exhibit, Garrett took a video of a cheetah stalking a crow that actually seemed to be teasing it, staying *just* out of reach and always flying away at the last possible second. When we wandered by the savannah a second time, we each coughed up a couple bucks to feed a carrot to a giraffe, because why the hell not?

I was sure he'd finally reach his limit when we went into the tropical reptile exhibit. Even I was a bit taken aback by the humidity, though that wasn't going to stop me from checking

out every inch of the place. If the guy I was with decided he'd had enough, though, I'd bail and pretend I wasn't at all disappointed.

The guy I was with...did not ask me to bail.

"That is the coolest thing I've ever seen," he murmured in an awestruck voice as we watched a Komodo dragon making its way across a large rock. "I always knew they were big, but... that thing is *huge!*"

I tapped the placard beneath the glass. "Says they get even bigger. Like ten feet?"

Garrett whistled low. Then he shot me a look. "Should I contact someone on Komodo and tell them not to let you on the island?" He pointed at the giant lizard. "Because I feel like you'd try to pet one."

"Hey now." I nudged him with my shoulder. "I do have *some* sense of self-preservation."

His eyebrow arched. "Wanting to scratch a snow leopard's chin is not 'self-preservation.'"

"Says you."

"Uh-huh." He pointed again at the dragon. "No scratches. No. Bad Tristan."

I burst out laughing. "Bite me."

"Hey, I won't, but I'm pretty sure he will."

The dragon looked our direction right then, its long, forked tongue flicking out of its mouth.

"You have to admit," I said, feigning innocence, "they are kind of cute in their own way."

Garrett blinked. The dragon flicked its tongue again.

“What?” I shrugged. “I’m just saying. Maybe he needs a hug.”

The look on his face—oh Lord. Like he had no idea what to make of me and wasn’t sure if he should laugh because that might encourage me.

I chuckled. “I’m kidding. No, I wouldn’t try to pet one of those.” I nodded toward it. “I won’t even hold my sister’s bearded dragon after he bit me.”

Garrett grimaced. “That...kind of sounds like it would hurt.”

“Eh, it wasn’t too bad. They don’t even bite that much, but that one wasn’t handled very well by the kid who had him before her, so he sometimes does. But it’s enough to make me nervous handling him.” I shook my head. “And yet I’ll let her cat absolutely maul my hands, so I don’t know what that says about me.”

An eyebrow flicked up. “You actually tease him until he attacks?”

“No, no.” I shook my head. “He likes to play, and sometimes he’ll get a little too riled up, especially if there’s catnip involved. He’s not mean at all, and he backs off right away.” I shrugged. “Just gets excited, that’s all.”

At that, Garrett laughed. “Sounds like Armani.”

“Oh yeah?”

He held up his hand, and for the first time, I noticed a few thin cuts of varying ages on his fingers and the back of his hand.

“Wow,” I said. “Are those claws or teeth?”

“Both.” He put his hand back in his pocket. “He’s like your sister’s cat—just gets excited and ends up biting.” His lips quirked. “Plus, I sometimes run my finger under a blanket or a couch cushion for him to attack, and... Well. Natural consequences.”

“Oh, *really?*” I narrowed my eyes. “So all this time you’ve been teasing me about dying because I chased a dragon or petted something I wasn’t supposed to, and you use your hand as a cat toy.” I rolled my eyes and muttered a playful, “Hypocrite.”

“My cat weighs sixteen pounds,” he protested. “Not... however many hundred. And he doesn’t have giant teeth and claws.”

“Sixteen *pounds?*” I glanced at him as we started to move from the Komodo dragon exhibit toward the next enclosure. “That’s huge!”

Garrett shrugged. “Himalayan.”

“Huh. I didn’t realize they got that big.”

“That’s what she—”

“Oh my *God.*”

He just cackled, and we kept walking.

After a few more exhibits—and plenty of joking and flirting—I glanced at my phone. “We still have about forty-five minutes. Anything you want to see before we head back to the meerkats?”

He seemed to think about that for a moment, then somewhat shyly said, “We could go through the night house again.”

“Yeah?”

“Sure.” Was he blushing? “The bats are fun to watch.”

Oh, dear Lord, this man was going to absolutely melt my heart. If we actually ended up dating or something after this, we’d have to get annual passes, because holy shit, a guy who didn’t think a day at the zoo was a childish waste of time.

The night house wasn’t far from the tropical reptile exhibit, so before long, we were walking back through the familiar entrance. The lighting was dimmer as soon as we got inside, and it kept getting darker until we reached the entrance to the actual exhibit. That let people’s eyes adjust, and there was a similar progression on the way out so the daylight wasn’t so blinding.

When we’d come through here earlier, there’d been a pretty long line. A class trip, I thought, since it was mostly kids who seemed to know each other and adults who looked like they were counting down until happy hour. Now the place was deserted, probably because the class had vacated, and there were two big shows happening soon at the elephant and orangutan exhibits. We’d already agreed to steer clear of those because neither of us particularly liked crowds, and as a bonus, it turned out the shows attracted enough people to leave the other exhibits pretty much empty. Perfect.

We stepped through the door into the exhibit, which was mostly quiet. There was a ramp leading from the door up to the actual viewing area, and apart from some very, very dim light coming from behind us and from the viewing area up ahead, it was pitch black down here.

The door thudded shut behind us, cutting off one of those light sources.

Then an arm around my waist almost made me stumble, and the next thing I knew, I was up against the wall with

Garrett's lips on mine.

Oh. Fuck. *Yes.*

Under cover of darkness with absolutely no one around, he didn't hold back like he had by the snow leopards, and his kiss was demanding and crushing and all-consuming. His hands slid under my jacket as his tongue slid into my mouth, and had it not been for his strong, solid presence pinning me to the wall, I'd have melted right there to the floor.

Holy hell, I wanted him. Yes, I was having a blast just wandering around and enjoying his company, but choosing between that and this? Give me this hot, needy man and some privacy.

He touched his forehead to mine, breathing hard against my lips. "Sorry. I, um... I've been dying to do that again."

"Don't apologize," I panted. "Just..." Fuck talking. I carded my fingers through his hair and reeled him back in, and the soft little whimper as I claimed his mouth... That was fucking magic. I'd forgotten how to want someone, but I was sure remembering now, and I—

The door opened, and we quickly separated before the faint light reached us. Clearing our throats and straightening our clothes, we continued up the ramp toward the viewing area.

My heart was going a million miles an hour. From the unexpected and all too brief moment. From being this turned on. From the thrill of being caught but not. Everything about this was heady, and I barely even noticed the animals moving around behind the glass in front of us. I was too fixated on the man beside me, his reflection *just* visible next to mine.

When he spoke, his voice was barely a whisper, and I doubted it was just because of all the signs warning people to be quiet in here.

“I know we paid for the donation.” He moistened his lips. “But we don’t have to stay to watch the meerkats.”

My pulse was impossibly fast now. Something told me he wasn’t bored with wandering around the zoo. I swallowed, gaze still fixed on our reflections, as if looking directly at him would give us away to the handful of other people now milling around us. “Are you saying you’d rather do something else?”

He rested his hand on my lower back. “We can stay as long as you want. I’m just putting it out there...” His hand slid down into my back pocket. “...that if you want to take off, I definitely won’t say no.”

Oh fuck. What meerkats?

“Which parking lot are you in?” And why was my voice suddenly hoarse?

“South. You?”

I swept my tongue across my lips. “North.” Figured we’d be on opposite ends of the park. “Where, um... Do you want to meet somewhere?”

“My place is off South Ashboro.”

It was a little challenging to run through my mental map while Garrett was standing this close to me with his hand on my ass, but I managed. “I’m out by the freeway. You’re definitely closer.”

His soft chuckle made me bite my lip. “You just want to go to my place so you can meet my cats.”

I turned to him and grinned. “Come for your cats, stay for everything else?”

It was his turn for a lip bite, and even in the near-darkness, I caught his eyes flicking down to my mouth and back. “Hey, whatever gets you into my bedroom.”

“That won’t take much. Believe me.”

His response was a breath of quiet laughter. Then he stole a quick kiss and freed his hand from my pocket. “Why don’t we, uh...calm down a bit. Then we can...” He nodded toward the exit.

“Sounds good to me.”

Good thing we were in the night house, because it did take a few minutes before either of us was presentable in public. Which...okay, that was clearly why he’d suggested coming back in here, though he did seem to enjoy watching the bats again. So did I—two of them were hilariously annoyed with each other—but mostly, I was itching to get to his place. Of course, that didn’t do much for helping me calm the hell down, but eventually, I was decent enough to venture outside.

We walked out through the steadily brightening light and into the daylight, which was still bright enough that we both had to squint and blink a little while our eyes finished adjusting. Once they did, I turned to Garrett. “So, text me your address, and I’ll meet you there?”

He nodded, taking out his phone. “I should probably give you my number.”

“You already did.”

He froze. “I—did I?”

“Mmhmm. When we took that selfie earlier.”

“*Ooh*, right. The one we were going to send to...” Garrett waved his hand. “Right. Okay, my address...” He quickly thumbed it into his phone and sent it.

A second later, my phone chirped, and I confirmed that I had it.

Then we exchanged grins and headed in opposite directions toward the parking lots. As I walked past numerous exhibits that would’ve each held my attention for ages on a normal day, my heart was still going wild. With every step, I expected him to text me and tell me he’d changed his mind. And once I was in my car, I was sure the GPS was going to lead me to a vacant lot somewhere, and Garrett was someplace else, laughing his ass off after blocking and ghosting me.

But no, it took me to an apartment building. And a text from Garrett said he was already there, and to come on up.

Oh, hell yes, I thought as I started up the stairs. *We’re really doing this*.

CHAPTER 7

GARRETT

I HAD ABOUT five minutes to convince myself I'd imagined this whole thing or that Tristan was going to have second thoughts.

Five minutes.

Then one of the stairs outside squeaked in that familiar way, and some tentative footsteps approached my front door.

Oh, please. Oh, please. Tell me it's—

The knock on the door drove a silent “Yes!” from my lips, and I'm not ashamed to say I indulged in a fist pump before I turned the deadbolt.

Then I opened the door to a grinning, blushing Tristan. Neither of us said a word as I stepped aside to let him in, but as soon as I shut the door behind us, it was game on. Tristan hooked a finger in my belt, pulled me in close, and kissed me like we'd been apart for weeks instead of maybe twenty minutes. He managed to toe off his shoes while we made out against the door, and we both nudged them out of the way before I tugged him back and started leading him toward my bedroom.

And now that we were behind closed doors and couldn't get caught...

“Oh, Jesus,” he whimpered as I tugged his hair back and started kissing his neck. His fingers dug into my shoulders. “*Fuck...*”

Fuck was right. I’d had to restrain myself so much while we’d been out in public, which usually wasn’t a problem for me, but I wanted this man so damn bad.

He moaned softly and rutted against me, letting me feel his hard-on through our clothes. “I don’t even...don’t even know what you’re into, but...sign me up.”

Sounded good to me.

I kissed under his jaw, then took his hand and led him down the hall. The cats were both in the living room, focused intently on murdering a squirrel that was two trees away on the other side of a locked window, so I shut the door behind us. We really didn’t need Elvis and Armani joining us after they lost interest in the squirrel.

With them occupied, I turned my attention back to Tristan, drawing him to me and sliding my hands under his shirt as I claimed another kiss. God, the heat of his skin beneath my palms, not to mention the way he moaned softly against my mouth—I hadn’t been this turned on in I didn’t know how long.

And I just met you. And I want to get to know you. But I also want you.

This wasn’t like me at all. Even as I lost myself in making out with Tristan, even as we shuffled toward my bed, losing our jackets and shirts along the way, I was aware of—and unnerved by—how unusual this was for me.

As I’d reminded myself a few times during our outing today, I had two speeds with men. Either we hooked up and

that was it, or—if I wanted to date someone—we took the long way to the bedroom.

I wanted Tristan, and not just sexually. There was no telling what kind of staying power we'd have, but I didn't want this to just be a hookup. He was funny, chill, smart, and he loved animals. Everything about him made me completely stupid in ways no one ever had. Not even that other guy.

But he also turned me on like *whoa*. So much that I didn't want to wait. I wanted his body right now. Under mine. Over mine. Didn't care—just naked and touching and kissing and finding out exactly what he sounded like and looked like when he was right on the edge... Jesus, yes, I needed him.

Except I also wanted to...

I didn't just...

What was I doing?

A couple steps shy of the bed, Tristan met my gaze, and even through the arousal, there was concern in his eyes. "You okay?"

Damn. He was perceptive too.

"I..."

"Hey." He nudged me gently toward the bed, then sat on the edge. "Come on. Sit."

I hesitated but sank onto the mattress beside him. "I don't want to kill the mood."

His smile made my spine tingle. So did the hand he slid over my thigh. "I'd rather hit pause, hear what's on your mind, and then pick up where we left off, than find out after the fact you didn't want to do this."

Man, this was a far cry from irritated looks, passive aggressive comments, and finally just grinning and bearing it to avoid friction even when I really didn't want to have sex.

I *did* want to this time. And Tristan was right—it was better to look this in the eye now than regret something after the fact.

Swallowing hard, I put my hand over his on my leg. I couldn't hold his gaze—what the hell was wrong with me?—so I stared down at our hands. “This... I don't usually do this.”

“Move this quickly, you mean?”

I nodded, then laughed humorlessly. “I sound like a kid with no experience.”

“Or someone who's been burned?”

I looked at him through my lashes and found nothing but understanding and gentleness in his eyes. Shifting my attention back to our hands, I quietly said, “Not... Not like this, honestly. Sex and love were always...different. Separate.”

“How so?”

I chewed my lip. “I slept around a lot when I was a teenager and into college. It wasn't until I had an actual boyfriend in college that I realized there was a difference between sex and intimacy. So, I usually...” My heart thumped against my ribs as I tried to find the right words. “I'll still hook up. It's been a while, but if I feel like it...” I half-shrugged. Then I made myself look Tristan in the eyes. “If I actually want to connect with someone, though, I don't usually jump into bed with them. Not right away.”

Tristan swallowed. “So...you don't normally hook up with someone you just met...if you're actually interested in them?”

I was terrified I was going to spook him if I tipped my hand that far, but he deserved the truth. If he balked and left... Well, then I'd have my answer before I'd let myself get in over my head.

"Yeah," I whispered. "I know we just met. I'm not saying this is love or that we're going to—"

"But there's potential," he said just as softly. "And you don't want to blow it."

My gaze snapped to his. "I... Yeah. Exactly."

He turned his hand over beneath mine and laced our fingers together. "I don't want to blow it either. Because, yeah, there's some potential here. I..." His cheeks colored, and the smile was so sweet and shy it melted my heart even before he said, "I want to see you after today."

"Me too. But I also... God, Tristan." I ran my thumb along the side of his hand. "I also really, really want you. I don't usually do this except with random hookups. But I want to this time."

The smile turned to a grin. "I kind of got that impression in the night house."

I laughed, which eased some of the tension that had been building in my chest. "Guess I wasn't very subtle, was I?"

"No, but I like the direct approach." He slid a little closer to me on the mattress. "Cuts down on the ambiguity, you know?"

"True." I chewed the inside of my cheek. "And... I do want to do this. I guess it just tripped me up because this isn't usually how I do things."

"But are you enjoying it?"

That was a question that didn't require any thought at all: "I've enjoyed every second since I met you this morning."

Had that really only been this morning?

And was there anyone else in the world with a sweeter smile than this man?

"I've enjoyed it too," he said. "Question is—since this isn't how you normally do things...do you want to stop?"

That didn't require any thought, either. I released his hand and wrapped my arm around him. With my other hand, I cupped his jaw, and just before I claimed his mouth, I murmured, "I definitely don't want to stop."

He grinned against my lips, but only for a second. Then we were off and running all over again—hands sliding all over each other's skin as we kissed. Sometimes it was hard and greedy. Other times soft and exploratory. My hard-on had abandoned ship during our conversation, but it was quickly coming back to life, especially when Tristan nudged me onto my back and straddled me. When he pinned my wrists to the bed...oh God, I was rock hard, and why the fuck did we still have pants on?

"For what it's worth," he murmured against my neck, "this isn't usually my style either." He let his lips skate up the side of my throat. "But I like it. And holy shit, you turn me on so damn much."

"Same," I breathed as he let go of one of my arms. Thank God—now I could touch his bare skin again. "I want...oh *fuck*." I arched under him when he slid a hand between us and cupped my hard dick.

His laugh was a warm breath across my collarbone. Then he came up and found my mouth again, kissing me long and

sexy before he said, “Maybe before we got started again, we should’ve...” He brushed his lips across mine. “Should’ve figured out what we both like?”

I slid my free hand up his back. “Figuring it out like this works.”

“Mmhm, it does.” He ran his thumb over the clothed head of my cock, making me gasp and arch again. “But... limits? Anything you don’t like?”

How in the world did he expect me to think right now? “Besides having too many clothes on?”

His laugh made my head spin, and he sat up. “How about we take care of that?”

“Good call.” We separated and started getting out of our remaining clothes.

After he’d undressed, he lay back on my bed, and I raked my eyes over him. He wasn’t a big guy to begin with, and naked, he was lean and gorgeous. His dick was a nice size, too—his was probably a little longer than mine, mine was a little thicker, both firmly average.

And I suddenly wanted my lips around his.

I crawled up between his legs and pressed a kiss to his inner thigh. When I glanced up at him, he was biting his lip and watching me intently, his eyes full of hunger and anticipation.

He did have a point that maybe we should slow down and check in about what we liked and disliked, but from the way he was staring at me in that moment, I decided I could safely intuit that he had no objection to getting his dick sucked.

So...I went down on him.

I'd always loved sucking cock. The salty taste. The way the head felt against my tongue. The slow slide of the hard shaft between my lips. It was always sexy as hell.

Even better? How Tristan gasped when I circled my tongue around the head. Those soft curses that tumbled off his lips when I teased his balls. His hips levitating slightly off the bed when I deep-throated him.

I didn't usually like someone putting a hand on the back of my head while I blew them, especially someone I hadn't been with enough to trust them not to choke me, but Tristan's touch was light. There was nothing forceful about it. Not like when he'd pinned my arms down. His fingers carded through my hair, twitching occasionally when I made him jump or shiver.

"Holy fuck," he moaned. "And I thought you were a good kisser."

I ran my tongue along the underside of his shaft. "You're one to talk."

"Mmm, speaking of..." He gestured for me to come up. As much as I wanted to keep teasing him, it had been a few minutes since I'd kissed him, and that was entirely too long. So, I crawled up and let him pull me down on top of him, and oh, yes, this was the best. Hot skin against hot skin. His strong arms around me. His talented, eager mouth against mine.

And that hard dick pinned between us alongside mine—that was sexy as hell too. Yeah, maybe this wasn't a normal thing for me, throwing myself into bed with someone who I was interested in for more than a hookup, but who the hell cared? Tristan was definitely someone I wanted to know, and he was also someone I just fucking wanted, so to hell with how I normally did things. This was how I did things with Tristan, and I liked it.

I bent to kiss his neck again. “Tell me what you want.”

“Mmph. You think I can think right now?”

I laughed softly. I was in the same boat, so I empathized. “Maybe not about anything too complicated.” I nipped his earlobe, loving the way that made him gasp. “But you can tell me if you want me to suck you off. Or if you want to fuck.”

His fingers dug into my shoulders, and he pushed his cock against mine. “Fucking sounds...sounds good.”

“Yeah?” I trailed more kisses under his jaw. “Any preference?”

“Haven’t been topped in *ages*.”

Oh. *Fuck*. Just *thinking* about rocking into that ass of his, driving him to oblivion, coming inside him—hell yes.

“Good thing I love to top, isn’t it?”

He whimpered, dragging his nails down my back. “Please, baby...”

I pushed myself up and met his wide, needy eyes. “How do you like it? Hard? Slow?”

Squirming under me, he said, “Not too rough.”

That was good to know. Given how he’d pinned my arms, I would’ve guessed he liked things a little rough. Duly noted.

I kissed him softly. “Let me grab a condom.”

He licked his lips and nodded.

It took some work, pulling myself away from his amazing body and addictive kiss, but I managed, if only because that was the only way I was going to get to fuck him. With a condom and the bottle of lube in hand, I sat back on my heels and glanced at him. “Any preference for positions?”

He seemed mesmerized by the sight of me opening up the condom wrapper. Still, he managed to answer, “Not really, but I kind of want to get on top and ride you.”

I damn near dropped the condom.

Tristan chuckled. “I take it you like the idea?”

“Uh-huh.” I somehow regained control, wondering when condoms had become such wildly complex devices that took this much concentration and manual dexterity to put on. When the stupid thing was where it belonged, I lay back on the pillows beside Tristan, and he didn’t hesitate.

Wow, he was sexy. He’d been sexy from the start. Sitting over me like this, though? His cock thick and hard between us as he ran his palms up my chest? Seriously fucking hot. I could take or leave anal sometimes—it definitely wasn’t required, and I wasn’t always in the mood for it—but right now, I was overcome with the need to be buried to the hilt in Tristan. Probably because he wanted to get topped, and all I wanted was to drive him out of his ever-loving mind.

Between the two of us, we got the lube open, and as we made out—I could *not* get enough of this man’s kiss—I teased and fingered him. He was so deliciously responsive, too, rocking his hips and moaning between kisses. Though he’d said he hadn’t bottomed in a while, he was clearly experienced enough that it didn’t take much to get him ready. Still, I kept teasing him, just because it was so fun and hot to get him all spun up like this.

Of course, that meant getting *me* spun up, too, and it wasn’t long at all before I slid my fingers free and mumbled, “I want to fuck you. *Now.*”

Tristan groaned and claimed another kiss. Then he sat up, and we were both breathless, frantic, and unsteady. Turned on as we were, this was going to be a quickie, no doubt about that.

Fine by me.

Between the two of us, we managed to guide my dick to him, and as he eased himself down, I could hardly breathe. Definitely going to be a quickie, because oh my God. Just the view was enough to make me painfully hard and dizzy with need. He was so gorgeous, and he wore all his pleasure on his sleeve—squeezing his eyes shut, biting his lip, shivering. He was well-prepped and took me easily, but he moved as if this were his first time ever bottoming. Like he just wanted to feel everything. Savor it all.

So damn sexy. Holy fuck.

“Oh my God,” he slurred as he lifted himself up again. “Ungh, you feel amazing.”

“So do you.” I ran my hands up his tight quads. “And you look...” I ran out of words. Breath. Thoughts.

His eyes locked on mine, and yeah, thinking was out of the question now. All I could do was stare and feel and lose my damn mind because somehow, I was naked and in bed with Tristan. Gorgeous, adorable, responsive Tristan.

I reached for his face, and when he leaned forward, I curved my hand behind his neck and pulled him down into a kiss, and...

Wow.

This was perfect. Hot. Sensual.

How have I only known you for a few hours?

I held him close and moved my hips as much as I could to complement his. He felt so damn good, and not just because I was inside him. I loved the heat of his skin against mine. I loved how he kissed me just right to make everything else in the world disappear. I loved how this was hotter than any hookup I'd ever had, and it also didn't *feel* like a hookup. We'd just met, so there was no telling if this would ever get off the ground, but in this moment, it absolutely felt like it would. This felt like one of those moments I'd look back on sometime down the road and marvel that there had ever been a time when I didn't know this person existed.

I sure knew he existed now, and every time he rolled his hips or dragged his lip across mine, it was a genuine miracle I didn't lose it. I wanted to come so bad, but I wanted to take him there, too, so I held back as much as I could.

When I slid a hand between us, Tristan lifted himself up, and he moaned even before my fingertips grazed his dick. He'd gone somewhat soft while he'd first started taking me, but he was quickly getting hard again now. After a few strokes, he was at full attention.

"Fuck, baby," he panted. "Gonna get me off like that."

"Yeah?" I was out of breath too. "Or I could come and then blow you."

He shivered hard, losing his rhythm for a couple of seconds. "No way I'm gonna last long enough for... *Fuck.*" His hips jerked, and he threw his head back. "Goddamn, I'm so—"

Whatever he said next didn't register, because I couldn't hold back anymore. Pumping him furiously, I dug my heels into the mattress and thrust up into him as I came with a

throaty cry. Above me, Tristan gasped and swore, and then my strokes were suddenly slick and hot as he came on my hand.

He slumped over me, and we both stilled as much as anyone could after a powerful orgasm. With a soft sigh, he let his head fall beside mine. Closing my eyes, I wrapped my arms around him, and we just stayed like that for a while, trembling and trying to catch our breath.

When he was finally somewhat steady, he lifted himself up on his arms and gazed down at me. He grinned, and he sounded vaguely drunk as he said, “Pretty sure that fish was the best twenty bucks I ever spent.”

I burst out laughing. So did he.

And yeah, he was absolutely right.

CHAPTER 8

TRISTAN

HAD it really been this morning that I was parking at the zoo, walking in through the gate, and planning to spend the day alone after watching a bear eat a salmon named after my ex?

Yeah, it had. Of all the ways the day could've actually played out, this was easily in the category of "slightly more probable than finding a winning lottery ticket on the ground or getting abducted by aliens."

And yet...here we were, in the middle of the afternoon, kissing lazily in Garrett's bed after we'd shared a shower. After we'd fucked. After he'd absolutely blown my mind and renewed my faith in sex, dating, and everything else I might want to do with an attractive man. I didn't even have to explain all my baggage about my stupid ex, either, because Garrett had dated the same guy. Our experiences hadn't been identical, but they were similar enough that we could probably understand each other's emotional landmines. Commiserate over them too.

That thought actually brought me up short. We had both dated the same asshole. We did have baggage and landmines. As much as we'd clearly hit it off, were either of us in the right place to be getting involved with someone else? Because we'd

both made it pretty clear we were interested in more than just getting each other off.

Garrett drew back, concern furrowing his brow. “You okay?”

Oh. Damn. Had I been zoning out? Apparently so.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m...” I absently ran my hand up his arm. “I guess...” Well, we needed to talk about it, so no time like the present. “Look, the whole reason we met was because we were giving a fuck-you to our ex. Are we...” I gnawed my lip, not sure how to word what I needed to ask.

“Are we over Kevin enough to think about getting involved with someone else?”

At least one of us was capable of articulating things. Nodding, I said, “Yeah. I mean, I’m over him. I think? But it still hurts, you know?”

“I know.” Garrett smoothed my hair, the touch as addictive as it was tender. “But I don’t think we have to be completely over him. Or anyone else we’ve dated.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...” His eyes lost focus as he seemed to gather his thoughts. “It isn’t like he just dumped one of us yesterday, you know? If we ran out and jumped in with someone the next day, then yeah, I could see that being a bit too soon. But it’s been months for me.”

“A couple of months for me.”

Garrett nodded. “Right. So, we’ve both had some time to process it. Of course, it still hurts. Of course, we’re still mad about things. But that doesn’t mean we can’t start moving on with our lives, you know? I mean, hell, if I really think about

it, I can get myself upset over how things went down with the guy I dated before Kevin, and that was when I was in college.”

“Really?”

“Oh, hell yeah. I’m over him, but it’s kind of like thinking back to a bully in school or that asshole who cut you off on the freeway a couple of weeks ago. It’s irritating, and you can work yourself up if you really want to, but the worst of it is over, you know?” He furrowed his brow. “Does that make as much sense as it did in my head?”

“It does,” I said. “I hadn’t thought about it that way, but... Yeah. It makes sense.”

He clasped my hand gently between our chests. “It’s something we should keep in mind, though. Kevin...” Garrett rolled his eyes. “He leaves a path of destruction behind him.”

“Ugh. He so does.”

“Right, so we just need to be aware of that going forward.” His brow pinched. “If, um... We did *just* meet. Like...this morning. So ‘going forward’ can mean a lot of things.”

“It can.” I searched his eyes. “Any thoughts on what you *want* it to mean?” Could I sound like more of a coward?

He smiled. “I think I want to keep an open mind? I don’t want to set expectations right off the bat, I guess. Maybe this will go somewhere. Maybe it won’t. Maybe we’ll fool around a few times and then decide we make better friends.” He half-shrugged as he caressed my cheek. “I’m game for whatever means I get to keep seeing you.”

That was...strangely...the most romantic thing anyone had ever said to me.

“So, just let things evolve how they want to evolve?” I slid a hand over his waist. “See what happens?”

His smile was cautious but sweet. “Why not?”

Returning the smile, I leaned in a little. “Sounds perfect to me.” Then I kissed him, and he pulled me closer to him.

I liked keeping things open-ended the way he was suggesting. There was no pressure to define this. No hurry to do anything, which was good considering we’d already gone at lightspeed from meeting to... Well, to this. Maybe tapping the brakes and letting the rest happen at a more leisurely pace.

A quiet thump-thump-thump worked its way to my ears.

What the hell?

I broke the kiss and was about to ask Garrett if he knew what the sound was, but he craned his neck toward the door and rolled his eyes.

“Oh, fine.” He sat up. “Do you mind if I let the boys in?”

“Let the—” My mind caught up. “Elvis and Armani? Oh my God, yes! I want to meet your cats!”

I genuinely hoped I never got tired of the way Garrett smiled, especially when it came to his boys.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and crossed the room to the door. As he opened it, he said, “Okay, okay, you guys can come in.”

Paws thumped on the floor, and then a very large, Siamese-colored fluffball with a smooshed nose cleared the footboard and landed right next to my legs.

“Well, hi.” I held out my hand. “You’re—this one is Armani, right?”

“Yep. And Elvis is...” Garrett looked down at the floor and traced a meandering path in the air with his hand. “He’ll probably come up after he’s done inspecting our clothes.”

“Sounds about right.”

Garrett climbed back into bed, and Armani strode up between us, tail in the air and upright nose twitching as he sniffed my hand.

“Hey, buddy.” Garrett stroked the cat, earning him a back arch and a happy chirp. “I know, I’m the worst, locking you out for...what, twenty minutes?”

I gasped theatrically and touched my chest. “You cruel cat dad!”

“I know, right?” He slung an arm over Armani, pulled him against his chest, and kissed the top of his head. “Just the *worst*.”

Armani clearly didn’t mind. He bumped his head against Garrett’s face and purred, not squirming or trying to get away at all.

“He actually likes that?” I asked.

“Mmhmm.” Garrett grinned and scratched under Armani’s chin, which made the cat purr even louder. “He loves stuff like this. Elvis doesn’t, but this one does.”

While it surprised me that a cat enjoyed being held that way, I didn’t imagine Garrett would’ve done it with a cat who *didn’t*. He clearly wasn’t that type, and he obviously adored his boys.

No wonder I already adore him.

Before those thoughts could get too comfortable, a slim orange tabby landed on the bed beside me. He froze and stared

at me with big yellow eyes.

“It’s okay, buddy,” Garrett said softly, still holding the other ball of fluff to his chest. “Come say hi. It’s okay.”

Moving slowly, I offered my hand to Elvis. He tensed, and for a moment, I thought he might take off. After a second or two, though, he stretched his neck out to sniff my fingers. Then he took a tentative step. Then another. His nose just grazed my fingertip as he sniffed, eyes flicking between my hand and my face as he cautiously checked me out.

Apparently, I passed muster, because he bumped his head against my hand, then arched his back and turned in a circle so I could pet him.

“*There* you go,” I said. “See? I won’t bite.”

I petted him as he walked in circles, and when he flopped on his side and started kneading the air, I ran my hand over him. I didn’t scratch his belly, though—that could wait until he knew me better, assuming he liked that.

As I petted Elvis, I looked up to meet Garrett’s gaze, and my hand stopped. The way he was staring at me...

“What?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head and resumed petting Armani. “Just...” He swallowed. “To tell you the truth, I adopted them the day after I moved in here. After I moved out of Kevin’s place.”

My stomach somersaulted. “You did?”

Garrett nodded. “After wasting that much time with a boyfriend who wouldn’t allow any pets in his place, it was kind of a fuck-you, but also... I mean, I wanted the company. I was suddenly living alone, and I missed having pets.” He

swept his tongue across his lips as he glanced at Elvis, who was now rolling around on his back while I scratched behind his ears. “It’s... I got so used to being with someone who doesn’t like animals...”

“Ugh, fuck that guy,” I muttered.

“Right? But it’s also...” He paused as if to collect his thoughts again. “It’s such a switch, being with a guy who’s nice to my cats. I know it shouldn’t be, but...”

“But after Kevin, it is. After Kevin, it’s nice to be with a guy who’s nice to *me*, so...”

“That too.” Garrett bent to press another kiss to the top of Armani’s head. Then he reached past the cat-filled gap between us and caressed my cheek. “I don’t know where this thing is going to go. But especially with as new as it is, I think it’s off to a good start.”

“Me too.” I covered his hand with mine and kissed the middle of his palm. “And hey, we aren’t spending Valentine’s Day alone.”

He blinked. “Oh. Yeah. I totally forgot today was Valentine’s Day!” He chuckled. “I’d suggest going to dinner or something, but...uh...”

“Everything is going to be packed.” I squeezed his hand before releasing it. “Alternatively, we could order takeout and hang out here with your cats.”

That laugh was absolutely going to be the death of me. “Sounds great. Fair warning, though: you’ll have to fight with these two if you get chicken or—wait. You’re vegetarian, aren’t you?”

“Yes. But I will be immensely entertained watching them try to steal your food.”

He snickered. “Uh-huh. You tell yourself that. Because they don’t just go after meat.”

Turned out he was right about that. Armani stole a pasta noodle off my plate, and while I was distracted by that, Elvis very nearly made off with a tomato of all things. They were a handful, that was for sure, but it was hilarious, and I was hanging out with Garrett and two cats. What wasn’t to love?

This morning, the day had seemed so bleak. Being single on Valentine’s Day kind of sucked, but spending it single and still licking my wounds from a fucked-up relationship with a cheating son of a bitch was a hell of a lot *more* miserable.

Somehow, though, my lonely Valentine’s Day had landed me here. With this beautiful man. With his adorable cats. With the possibility of some kind of future between us. I didn’t know if that future meant fuck buddies, friends, boyfriends, or who knew what, only that for the first time in a long time, I was excited about someone. I wanted someone, and I felt wanted myself again.

Whatever happened, wherever this went, I was blissfully happy today.

The day had been a blast. I’d let myself get little hearts in my eyes every time he so much as looked at me.

And now, in his arms with both his cats racked out on the bed with us...

I went to sleep with a huge smile on my face.

EPILOGUE

Garrett

THE FOLLOWING VALENTINE'S DAY.

Tristan and I didn't feed any fish named Kevin to the bears this year. No mice to cobras. No cockroaches to meerkats. No whole chickens to the Komodo dragons, which the zoo had added this year.

We'd both received the emails about the event, and we'd both laughed about it and debated which we should donate to. On the morning of Valentine's Day, though...

"Oh shit!" I'd been putting away the milk after making my coffee, and a photo held to the fridge by a couple of cat magnets had caught my eye. It was the selfie Tristan and I had taken in front of the bear enclosure last year. The one we'd intended to send to Kevin as a fuck-you. We'd never gotten around to that, though, and instead, it wound up printed out and attached to our fridge.

Tristan was on the couch with Armani in his lap, and he'd propped his phone on the cat, who'd jumped at my

exclamation and nearly knocked both the phone and Tristan's coffee to the floor. As Tristan settled Armani back down, he asked, "What's wrong?"

I gestured at the photo. "We forgot to sign up for the zoo thing. Feeding the bears and stuff."

He blinked. "Oh. Crap. I guess we did."

I pursed my lips as I picked up my coffee off the counter. "They let us do the meerkat on the day of last year. So, we could probably still show up and do it if we want to."

Tristan seemed to consider it. As I sat beside him, he shook his head. "Nah. I don't think we need to."

"No?"

Another shake of his head. Sliding his hand over my thigh, he said, "I think I forgot about it because I don't really think about Kevin anymore, you know? He's ancient history."

"Good point. I think I only wanted to do it because it's how I met you."

A full year into this, and Tristan's smile *still* melted my heart like it had on day one.

"Well," he said. "We could still go. Make it a tradition or something? But make it about us, not him."

"I like the sound of that."

After we'd finished our coffee, put on our shoes, and explained to the cats that we wouldn't be gone forever, we headed downstairs and got in my car.

While I drove, Tristan checked the newsletter that we got every month now that we were annual pass holders. It had some updates about exhibits that were temporarily closed, and

about a new one opening soon. Some kind of marsupial thing, apparently. An expansion on the Australian section.

I was looking forward to seeing it, but mostly I was looking forward to another day of strolling around the now-familiar park with the man who'd become a fixture in my life. We'd taken it slow and played it by ear in the beginning, and our relationship had definitely evolved. Sex was easy. Being friends was easy. Even the falling in love part had been easy. We'd both just been cautious because of our respective pasts with our asshole ex, and so we hadn't wanted to rush anything.

We hadn't rushed them. They'd just...happened. Like moving in together—we'd both been hesitant about that because living with Kevin had been awful. But Tristan was over so much that even the cats started to get confused when he was gone. A few overnight stays a week had morphed into entire weekends, which had progressed to him bringing over his work laptop on days he worked from home.

After the third or fourth time we went to his place and found a week's worth of mail waiting for him, I'd said, "You know, we practically live together already. If you want to make it official, I'm game."

This was made exponentially easier by my saint of a landlord, who was willing to keep me on my annual lease while having Tristan listed as a roommate. The lease stipulated that if Tristan wanted to move out, all he had to do was notify both me and the landlord, and he was free and clear. That put less pressure on us to make this a permanent thing.

Last week, six months after he'd started having his mail sent to my apartment, he'd signed with me on the annual lease.

"Let's do this," he'd said with a smile as he'd signed it.

So...we were doing it. Living together. Enjoying each other's company. Experiencing a relationship the way we were supposed to—where we could disagree and stand our ground on things, where we could set boundaries and enforce them, but we also still liked each other and wanted to be together. That shouldn't have been a novelty, but after Kevin? It absolutely was.

The longer Tristan and I were together, the more I wondered why in God's name I'd stayed with Kevin. Or why I'd let myself get so hung up on him. Or why I'd bothered hurting for him

I mean, it made sense. He'd jerked me around. He'd cheated on me. I'd stupidly fallen in love with him, and I'd been so far under his thumb that I'd honestly thought I didn't want to lose him.

Now? Good riddance, motherfucker. What we'd had wasn't a relationship. It was a shitshow. Relationships weren't supposed to be miserable. They took effort, but they weren't supposed to be *hard*. Not the kind of hard that made every day feel twenty-three hours too long and turned every interaction into a soul-sucking exercise in how much bullshit a person could tolerate.

The longer I was with Tristan, the less I cared about Kevin. Yeah, sometimes I could think about him and get myself irritated and angry, but that was at him for treating me like shit and at me for wasting so much time with him.

Then I'd take one look at the man who lived with me now, and all of that would just...go away. It didn't matter what he was doing—concentrating on something while he worked, laughing as he played with Elvis or Armani, focusing on a movie or TV show with his head against my chest and my arm

around his shoulders. Even on the rare occasion when I was annoyed with him or we were disagreeing, I knew it was a temporary thing. The worst day with Tristan was better than the best day with Kevin, hands down.

No, we weren't perfect—not as individuals or as a couple—but we were perfect for each other. With Tristan, I was happy. I was completely and utterly content. Instead of walking on eggshells and worrying that I was going to piss off Kevin somehow, I could concentrate on making Tristan as happy as I was.

Though that was the one tiny fly in the ointment—the nagging worry in the back of my mind that he *wasn't* happy, or that this relationship with me *wasn't* enough. He hadn't given me any indication that that was the case. Maybe this was just a lingering ghost from Kevin—that fear that I wasn't good enough.

It was probably all in my head. Tristan had no reservations about telling me if he didn't like something. He was calm and non-confrontational about it. He didn't pick fights—he just wasn't a doormat. So, odds were, if he wasn't happy, he'd say something.

Right?

I tried to shake that worry away as I pulled into the familiar parking lot outside the zoo where we'd met. We were going to have a fun, relaxed day together, and I wasn't going to get up in my own head about stupid things that I was probably imagining.

Except as we started walking around, I didn't think I was imagining how quiet Tristan was.

Or how nothing—not even the snow leopards—could hold his attention for very long.

That...wasn't a good sign. Was it? Maybe he just wasn't in the mood to be here. It was kind of a chilly, rainy day—it was February, after all, and last year had been unusually nice—and Tristan wasn't generally a fan of being cold. I'd learned that when we'd given non-forced-march hiking a try. Turned out we actually both enjoyed it when it was a more relaxed pace and we could enjoy the journey instead of sprinting toward the destination. There'd been a couple of occasions last fall, though, where we'd barely made it past the trailhead before turning back because it was just too damn cold.

“Screw this,” he'd said on the way back to the car one chilly morning. “No more hiking until spring.”

I'd chuckled and agreed. Cold wasn't my favorite thing either.

Today, I didn't think it was the weather that was bothering him, because even in the tropical reptile house, he didn't shake it off. In fact, he got even quieter. Even more distracted.

Uh-oh.

As we walked between a couple of enclosures, I touched his back. “Hey. Everything okay?”

“Hmm?” He looked up at me and smiled. “Yeah, it's fine. Why?”

I shrugged. “You've been a little quiet.”

“I'm good.” His smile seemed a bit less convincing. Like he was really trying to *be* convincing. “Probably just tired since someone kept me up half the night.”

Okay, if he was making playful jokes about our sex life, then maybe this was in my head. But we'd pulled some long nights before, and he'd bounced back without missing a beat, so I still didn't quite buy it.

I let it go for now, though. If there was something going on, then we should talk about it in private. I was not about to be like the man we'd both dated previously.

We turned the corner, and my worries slid toward the back of my mind as the next enclosure caught my attention.

"Holy shit." I stared through the glass as we came closer. "Is it... Has it actually gotten *bigger* since last year?"

"I'm pretty sure they do that," Tristan said with a laugh. "And...yeah. I'm pretty sure it's bigger."

Basking under a light on top of a huge rock, the Komodo dragon lazily flicked its long tongue in and out. I wasn't sure if it was the same lizard we'd seen last year, or if it had grown, but it was definitely bigger. Seven or eight feet at least.

"I still think it would be cool to see them in the wild," Tristan said.

I laughed and rolled my eyes as I wrapped an arm around his waist. "Baby, we've talked about this. No chasing dragons. You'll get yourself killed."

He turned an innocent look on me. "But if I had you there to supervise..."

Chuckling, I pressed a kiss to his forehead. "You mean, if you had me there to keep you out of trouble."

"Same thing, isn't it?"

"I guess?"

“Come on.” He elbowed me playfully. “Don’t tell me you’d pass up an opportunity to go to Bali, and then go to Komodo and see...” Tristan flailed a hand at the disinterested lizard.

Admittedly, it did sound like quite the adventure. And we *had* been talking about taking a big trip somewhere at some point. If he was still onboard with that, then maybe everything I’d been worried about earlier really *was* all in my head.

“Okay. Maybe. As long as you promise not to try to pet the dragons.”

He sighed theatrically. “Fine. I won’t pet the dragons.”

“Or scratch them. Or try to feed them. Or—”

“Ugh, you take the fun out of everything.”

“If by ‘fun’, you mean letting you lose limbs, then...yes.”

He laughed. “Okay, but seriously, that would be a fun trip. Bali is supposed to be amazing, and you can get to Komodo pretty easily from there.”

I cocked a brow. “Have you been researching this?”

A blush spread across his face. So did a sly smile. “Maybe?”

“Uh-huh. You have, haven’t you?”

“Yes. I have.” Tristan slid a hand into mine, and his expression turned startlingly serious. “Bali popped up on a post I was reading about amazing honeymoon destinations.”

I furrowed my brow. “You were reading a post about—” My brain caught up and my teeth snapped together. “Wait...”

“What do you think?” He held my gaze. “A honeymoon with Komodo dragons?”

My mouth had gone dry. “A honeymoon... But we’re not...”

The grin came back.

And then, right there in front of the Komodo dragon exhibit at the zoo where we’d met, the man I loved went to one knee.

“I want to go chase dragons with you.” From his jacket pocket, he produced a small box. “Will you marry me, Garrett?”

This was really happening? Oh. Fuck. This was really happening.

My head was spinning—probably because I’d forgotten to breathe—and some voices murmured and cameras snapped all around us.

Tristan’s forehead creased with worry, and I realized I’d been staring stupidly for long enough that he might’ve thought I was trying to figure out how to tactfully say no.

Smiling down at him, I nodded. “Definitely.”

His face lit up, turning me to mush just like every time, and a second later he was on his feet with his arms around my neck. I hugged him fiercely, trying not to fall apart.

“I love you,” I whispered shakily.

“I love you too.” Tristan drew back, grinning from ear to ear. “And I’m serious about the dragons. We’re absolutely—”

I cut him off with a kiss. Then, “Anything you want, baby.”

“Even if I want to pet a dragon?”

“Anything except that.”

He just laughed and kissed me again.
Turned out I was wrong last year after all.
Because *this* was the best Valentine's Day ever.

The End.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L.A. Witt is a romance and suspense author who has at last given up the exciting nomadic lifestyle of the military spouse (read: her husband finally retired). She now resides in Pittsburgh, where the potholes are determined to eat her car and her cats are endlessly taunted by a disrespectful squirrel named Moose. In her spare time, she can be found painting in her art room or destroying her voice at a Pittsburgh Penguins game.

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